

UNTOUCHABLE CITIZENS:

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE LIBERATION
PANTHERS AND DEMOCRATISATION IN
TAMIL NADU**

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*“It is clear today, contrary to Gandhi’s opinion, that the Untouchables will not finally be emancipated save by themselves: the good will of their politician superiors cannot be enough”
(Dumont 1980: 223)*

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*“The innocent children playing here in the dust today, these guileless, defenceless children should not be enslaved in future. They should not, like us, be imprisoned in cherais. They need to live from generation to generation with all the benefits and freedom available to others. In order to protect their future, we need to make sacrifices today ... As a child of your house I feel obliged to tell you something. Instead of merely blaming others for the problems of this village, attempt to unite amongst yourselves forgetting your grievances, religions and differences”
(Thirumavalavan: 18/07/99).*

DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the following thesis is all my own work,

Date: 25/07/2002.

THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Title of Thesis: Untouchable Citizens: An Analysis of the Liberation Panthers and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu.

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In 1950 the constitution of independent India rendered the practice of untouchability a criminal offence. Special programmes of affirmative action were also instituted on behalf of the Untouchables, now known as Scheduled Castes, to offset centuries of deprivation. Theoretically the introduction of the universal franchise created a nation of equal citizens, and the reservation of parliamentary seats for the SCs guaranteed that they would be represented. The *de jure* abolition of untouchability has not, however, resulted in its *de facto* eradication (Desai 1978: 111). Structural and social inequalities have conspired to ensure the continuing subordination of the majority of the Scheduled Castes. Disillusionment with the inadequacies of the institutions of interest mediation has, since the 1970s, been channelled into extra-institutional mobilisation and protest for change. Drawing upon the example of civil rights activists in the United States, many of the SCs have rejected the appellations by which they are commonly known and have called themselves Dalits. Dalit is a Marathi word meaning 'downtrodden' and it has been adopted to symbolise the rejection of the caste system and the values that sustain it. Most authors have focused on the experience of Dalit movements in the north of India. This thesis charts the rise, and attempts an analysis of the Liberation Panther (LPs) movement in the southern state of Tamilnadu. The particular history of political development in the state, a form of Dravidian nationalism, resulted in a polity that was ideologically committed to the eradication of caste. Only in recent decades have autonomous Dalit organisations have been able to challenge the Dravidian hegemony. Using the insights of social movement theory this thesis charts the conditions of Dalit mobilisation in Tamil Nadu, its modes of protest and organisation and its impact in the state. Whilst much has been written about participatory 'new social movements', this thesis highlights the problematic of leadership and the dilemmas of caste-based mobilisation. Social movements, it is argued, are shaped by the culture from which they emerge – both in terms of their *social* and *spatial* practices. Most Dalits are poor, and continue to reside in segregated housing areas, but this thesis argues that they are increasingly assertive in their demand for equal rights and social respect. Of particular significance is the entry of the LPs into electoral politics in 1999. Dalit movements and parties may be flawed, but in challenging the status quo and opening up the political process to hitherto excluded groups of people, they are contributing toward the democratisation of Indian democracy.

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The ESRC provided generous funding that enabled me to embark on this study and make the necessary trips to India. Without their help this project would not have got off the ground. TTS not only arranged somewhere for me to stay, but also granted me access to library and social facilities. Dalit Resource Centre and the Social Analysis Centre staff were extremely helpful and deserve especial thanks. Gabrielle Dietrich took the time to read through my MSc dissertation and offer invaluable comments and advice. She also offered encouragement and advice throughout my time in India.

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More closer to home I am indebted to countless people for guiding me through the morass of my notes to a more or less coherent draft. Both my supervisors provided encouragement and direction when it was needed both before and immediately after my return from India. Jonathan Spencer, who started off as my second supervisor, kindly accepted the extra workload whilst Roger was away. He helped me through the process of turning rough chapters into a PhD, and had to read through prospective chapters more than once. Roger Jeffery may have missed out on this period, but read through and commented on a first draft within weeks of his return from a hectic research visit to the north of India. A big 'thank-you' to both of them.

In periods when I have been struggling to find an argument or theme that runs through my work, or when I have been trying to cut the chapters that I had down to size my father has been of invaluable assistance. He has uncomplainingly accepted each new draft and offered comments and criticisms within days despite the pressures and stress of his own work. He deserves especial thanks for guiding me through the bitter processes of editing and finding a linking thread through the thematic chapters that I already had.

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It is customary to conclude by acknowledging the lynchpin of the study in question, but no simple thanks or acknowledgement could possibly reflect my gratitude to Edwin and his family. Edwin is a childhood friend and companion, but his selfless co-operation, interest and assistance went well beyond the call of duty. For much of my stay in Tamil Nadu I was made to feel like one of the family. Nesamani Akka, Shanti Akka, Danny and Athai never tired of discussing pertinent issues with me, feeding me and keeping me alive through the year that I spent in India. Edwin was an ever-present guide, translator, companion and critic. When he left his job as an AC mechanic half way through my fieldwork he never hesitated to join me. Without him, it may truly be said, much of this thesis would not have happened.

INTRODUCTION

Untouchability Undone?

DALIT DREAMS AND DALIT STRUGGLES

Dhanalakshmi sighed as she looked through the photographs. The Dalit houses in Kodankipatti lay forever in ruins in the pictures, their tiles strewn and smashed over the floor, and the skeletal wooden frames that they had rested upon casting shadows over the wreckage. “What do you think about this”, she asked, “do you think that this is just? ... We are human beings too!” Dhanalakshmi is a twenty-year old woman living in Melavassal, the largest Dalit Housing Unit in Madurai. She has been educated up to 8th Standard (the year before GCSEs begin in this country), is an excellent seamstress, and is also qualified to drive an auto-rickshaw. Her father is a municipal worker, the house where they live is in his name and their occupancy depends on at least one member of the family remaining in municipal service. Her brother, who would otherwise be expected to follow in his father’s footsteps, is an unpaid, full-time activist for the Liberation Panther Movement. Deprived of his income the family lacks the resources to procure a vehicle, and so Dhanalakshmi earns some extra cash by mending and making clothing on the battered old Singer sewing machine under the awning at the front of the house. With her mother she does most of the cooking for the family, collects the water, and looks after the livestock that they have acquired through a government scheme. Largely confined to the house and the immediate locality she manages to keep herself informed through the perusal of newspapers, watching television and talking to the many visitors who come to the house. As a result she possesses a passionate sense of justice.

“I did not always feel this way, this concerned”, she insisted. “When I was in school life was just, you know, ‘jolly’. I didn’t care about these sorts of things (indicating the photos). It was only during the riots in Subramaniapuram (a Madurai Suburb) in 1996 that I began to develop a different view of life. When people from that area came here and told their pitiable stories it really made me cry, and it made me angry. I felt that this was dreadfully wrong and I began to understand my elder brother’s commitment to the movement”. Things are bad here, she acknowledged, surveying the children playing in the dust and dirt at the colony entrance. They would be at school but for economic necessity. “They say school is free, but it never is; they hassle you for ten

rupees, for the uniform, and five rupees for the books, and so on”.¹ In such a situation it would be easy to develop a sense of fatalism, and to agree with those who argue that the position of the lowest castes is immutable. Dhanalakshmi, however, is convinced that “the day will come, and not in the distant future, but soon, when we will gain our independence. *Our Independence Day, our freedom day!*”

Dhanam’ is one of millions of ex-Untouchables, or Scheduled Castes (SCs – the Constitutional term for the Untouchables), who reject the basis of their subordination and aspire towards a better and more equal society. In the last decades of the 20th Century the SCs have become an increasingly organised and political force in Tamil Nadu. Calling themselves by the Marathi term ‘Dalit’, meaning ‘oppressed or downtrodden’, many ex-Untouchables have begun to mobilise and fight for the proper implementation of the constitution. The term ‘Dalit’, as Zelliott observes, implies “those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way. There is in the word itself an inherent denial of pollution, *karma*, and justified caste hierarchy” (1996: 267). Since the 1970s, the horizontal mobilisation of the oppressed has posed as much of a challenge to the dominance of the higher castes as legislation has done. Whilst the constitution of Independent India adopted the universal franchise and proclaimed the equality of all citizens, it is at the local level that relations of power are challenged, negotiated and reconfigured. When villagers in Kodankipatti refused to perform the degrading work that was traditionally assigned to the untouchable members of society, it was they who had to face the wrath of the dominant caste in their village and the social ostracism that resulted from their decision. Likewise, when Murugesan contested and won the seat reserved for SCs in the Melavalavu panchayat elections in 1997 it was he who had to stand against the locally dominant Thevar caste. The legal recognition accorded to the post of panchayat president was insufficient to protect Murugesan and his followers from being massacred in broad daylight by those who could not countenance the elevation of an Untouchable to a position of responsibility.²

¹ Shiri (1998: 26-7), Majumdar (1999: 283), and Kaul (2001:158) all illustrate the ways in which poverty constrains the educational options of Dalit households.

² The examples of Kodankipatti, Melavalavu, and the elections in Chidambaram recur throughout this thesis as illustrations of caste discrimination and Dalit protest. They are dealt with in detail in specific chapters but a summary of the events may be found in the appendix. The deep-rooted nature of caste discrimination was rendered starkly apparent at the dawn of the 21st Century when relief for victims of the earthquake in northern India was reportedly distributed along caste lines. The Dalits were “grossly

BEYOND POLITICS: EXTRA-INSTITUTIONAL PROTEST FOR CHANGE

To suggest that nothing has changed since Independence would be wrong. “Changing formal institutions”, as Putnam avers, “can change political practice” (1993: 184).³ The Constitution *has* undermined the legitimacy of caste and provided the oppressed with the institutional means to challenge their subordinate status. The capitalisation and liberalisation of the economy, in conjunction with the reservations system, has combined to reduce the association between occupations and caste status. Payment in cash means that contractual exchanges are divorced from the connotations of purity and impurity, and political legislation has guaranteed the SCs parliamentary representation. This thesis is about these processes of social and political change in contemporary Tamil Nadu, and it raises a number of questions relating to Dalit mobilisation in the state.

The history of Dravidian politics in the state renders this an ideal site for an assessment of identity and protest politics. This study poses the following questions: (1) how can democracy be preserved or even enhanced under conditions of high extra-institutional mobilisation? (2) What is the current situation of Dalits in Tamil Nadu and how and why, if at all, do Dalits resort to protest? Here I consider how people are both driven and inspired to protest. (3) How are egalitarian and democratic ideas instantiated at a local level? In the 1999 elections in Chidambaram, for example, the rights to self-determination and citizenship were translated into the slogan: ‘We are voting for ourselves’. (4) How do the action concepts of Social Movements translate into the everyday lives of their members? For instance, the Dalit determination to refuse demeaning jobs across the state is ideologically consistent with movement objectives, but the patriarchal nature of many Dalit households shows how the concept of women’s rights have yet to filter into everyday practice. (5) How are the demands and fears of Dalits located and played out in spatial terms? The continuing isolation of Dalits into separate settlements is a denial of equal citizenship.

short-changed in this highly inequitable distribution chain”, according to P. Menon (2001: 14). The deprivation of the marginalised Dalits is further highlighted by the fact that the limited relief following the disaster gave them “the kind of access to food they would not have got in normal times”.

³ Corbridge & Harriss (2000: 21) appear to be broadly in agreement with this assessment, but they draw upon Gramsci and Chatterjee to suggest that the Indian case is an example of a ‘passive revolution’. Legislation and planning, in other words, are substituted for political reform on the ground.

How does Dalit protest attempt to realise the spaces that were theoretically opened up by the constitution? (6) Finally, what are the implications of Dalit entry into politics for the democratisation of Indian democracy? In answering these questions this study addresses the literature on three themes: caste, social movements and democratisation.

THE STUDY

The thesis examines the continuing causes and objectives of Dalit protest and highlights the changing relationship between Dalits and the state in Tamil Nadu. At the heart of this analysis is the issue of why Dalits feel the need to engage in protest movements despite the Constitutional provisions that ought to ensure their equality. It is argued that many Dalits are still dependent upon dominant landlords who tend to be from higher castes.⁴ The position of rural Dalits is particularly vulnerable, and the assertion of their rights can lead to them being ostracised or subjected to violence, though this does not mean that the Dalits are able to escape caste discrimination within the urban environment. In both, the correlation between caste and class *has* increasingly been subjected to challenge by the liberalisation and modernisation of the economy and the provision of affirmative action programmes.⁵ Whilst Dalit activists contest the efficacy of government programmes, the emergence of an educated, professional and relatively wealthy Dalit middle class constitutes a resource base for social action. The rise of Dalit consciousness and resistance would have been much harder without alternative sources of income and increasing levels of education and self-respect.

To select one particular movement as 'typical' of the others is a meaningless exercise in a state where there are over 70 different Dalit organisations. This study focuses on the Liberation Panthers (DPI) because they are one of the largest Dalit movements in Tamilnadu and are in the process of transforming themselves from a movement into a

As they note, however, the effects of such a 'revolution' do filter down to the population and can effect change.

⁴ Reddy (1990), Karanth (1998), Chowdry (1998), Harriss-White & Subramanian (1999), and Jeffrey (2000) provide ethnographic analyses that support this assertion and highlight the continuing dependence of many Dalits.

⁵ Sharma (1991: 69), Karanth (1997: 324-5), Subramanian (1999: 65-73), Corbridge & Harriss (2000, chapter 9) make similar claims. Sebastian (1994) has a detailed analysis of the impact of affirmative action programmes in Tamilnadu.

political party.⁶ Activists from other movements disagreed with many of the tactics adopted by the DPI and some saw them as representing a particular caste constituency. With these disclaimers in mind, however, it is possible to distinguish some shared issues that motivate the diverse strands of Dalit mobilisation. There is, arguably, a repertoire of protest that serves not only as an opportunity for the manifold protest groups and parties, but also as a constraint that limits the degree of innovation any one organisation can attempt.⁷ By highlighting these points of similarity I hope to attain a broad picture not only of the Liberation Panthers but also of the organisational and ideological bases of Dalit protest more generally. The demands and tactics of the diverse movements may be disentangled to reveal common objectives. “Different *dalit* movements highlight different issues related to *dalits* around different ideologies”, as Shah observes. “All of them, however, overtly or covertly assert a *dalit* identity though its meaning is not identical or precise for everyone” (Shah 1990: 317). This thesis attempts to assess the organisation, ideology and strategies pursued by the Liberation Panthers, and the context in which they operate. In so doing I hope to highlight the problems and promises of Dalit mobilisation in the state.

BREAKDOWN OF THESIS CHAPTERS:

Although Dalits are increasingly assertive and aware of their rights, the majority of them continue to live in conditions of poverty. The march to democratic equality and citizenship in India is neither smooth nor assured but confused, complex and often contradictory. The structure of this thesis, therefore, is thematic rather than linear. The absence of a chronological narrative highlights the fact that there is no *one* story to tell, but many overlapping events and experiences. The chapters on the elections are placed at the end because they bring together many of the issues that are raised elsewhere, and not to suggest a culmination of DPI activity. By highlighting related and interconnected themes I seek partly to examine and problematise the diverse aspects of the Dalit struggle but especially to reflect the concerns of my respondents.

⁶ The *Dalit Panther Iyyakkam* (DPI) is so known in recognition of the radical Maharastrian Dalit Panther Movement of the 1970's. In Tamil, however, the movement is always known as the Liberation Panthers (*Viduthulai Cirruthaikal*). Confusion arises because the activists insist on referring to themselves as the DPI for short. In this thesis, therefore, both versions will be used interchangeably.

⁷ It is no surprise, for example, that the Dalit Panther Iyyakkam chose to enter the electoral fray in 1999. Despite the ideological contradictions inherent in such a move, the tactic of democratic

The focus of each chapter was not decided in advance or derived from the reading but based on issues that arose in the fieldwork.

The first section deals with the theoretical bases of the study and places it within a wider social and political context. Through a mixture of ethnography, interviews and literature reviews this study examines the context of Dalit action, the goals of the DPI, its form of organisation and its impact in society. In Chapter One I introduce the Liberation Panthers and outline their history, their mode of organisation and sphere of operation. In this chapter I highlight the methodology of my research, explain what I did, where I went and why. My research strategy evolved through interaction with movement members and involved tracing the movement back to the sites in which it operates. In the second half of this chapter I reflect on the difficulties I faced in the field and relate the concerns of this thesis to the study of social movements in general. Although I interviewed both activists and non-participants, I have chosen to focus upon active members of the DPI who are at the forefront of the struggle for social change. The contention is not that they are representative of the Dalit population as a whole, but that their actions and words have a much wider impact than might be supposed from the numbers who take part in roadside demonstrations. Little has been written about Dalit movements in Tamil Nadu. Chapter Two, therefore, introduces the specific context of the thesis as well as applying the insights of social movement theory to an analysis of democracy and discontent in the state and in India more generally. It is argued that political movements follow recognised patterns of action and that they do not, for the most part, threaten the existence of the Indian state and often enter the political process themselves. This does not mean that they do not demand structural changes but that they recognise the possibility to effect reform from within the current system, and are pragmatic about the avoidance of repression.

Chapter Three argues that the repressive aspects of the caste-system have often been downplayed by the assertion that Dalits live 'in consensus' with the caste system. This chapter places Dalit activism in its social context, highlighting the fact that not everyone is in a position to rebel, but also taking issue with the notion that those Dalits who do not join social movements are in agreement with the *values* of the caste

participation was seen as an imperative for movement survival. Those movements that continue to reject the parliamentary process still conform to broad patterns of acceptable and recognised protest.

system. The risks of Dalit assertion are both real and apparent. Movements, therefore, face great difficulties in mobilising individuals into action. Despite this, countless examples of local resistance highlight the fact that many Dalit communities, not only those engaged in movement activism, are no longer prepared to tolerate their subordination. Where there is resistance there is power, as Abu-Lughod (1990) insists, and Dalit assertion has often prompted violent counter-movements. In face of the dangers of activism the 'free rider' problematic might be expected to apply, but movement leaders employ powerful discourses of heroism and honour to create a sense of solidarity and determination.

The next section assesses the material context of Dalit action, and seeks to analyse the economic and social setting of social movement activity. The Liberation Panthers do not operate in a vacuum but respond to specific features of their social world. Chapter 4 focuses on the economic considerations and alterations that hamper or enable protest. I show that changes in the structure of opportunities enabled the lower classes of society to escape the servitude that precluded mass protest action prior to the Raj, but ties of dependency persist in contemporary India. The chapter discusses the importance of protest movements in making states accountable to their citizens. It also follows Kohli (1987) and Sen (1997) in questioning the capacity of the liberal state to effect social change. It is argued that poverty is not solely an economic condition, and that the Dalit struggle cannot be explained purely in material terms since economic success for Dalits has rarely been attended by an increase in their social status. Dalit movements often arise in response to local issues, but these concerns are reflected in the conditions that Dalits live in across India. Chapter 5, therefore, considers the *spatial* context of Dalit action.

An examination of the social places from which movements such as the DPI emerge, and of how they attempt to reconfigure social relations across and through space, will emphasise the caste-based nature of much social interaction. It is argued that the public sphere is a universal, abstract realm within which citizens can meet 'others' and exchange opinions and values. Fifty years after the creation of a democratic state this sphere largely continues to be a 'virtual' entity. Caste continues to determine levels of access to, and recognition within, 'public spaces'. It will be argued that the struggle over and in space represents an attempt to forge a more open and equal

society in which the views of all sectors can be represented. The egalitarian promise of such struggles, however, is often undermined by a tendency to organise along caste lines in a manner that accentuates divisions rather than allowing for co-operation across them. Highlighting the problems associated with mobilisation on the basis of caste is not to insist that all Dalits share the same experiences. Rather, the community is divided along generational, regional, caste, religious, gender, class, and language lines.

The third part of the thesis problematises important aspects of the Dalit struggle, and seeks to assess their practices and rhetoric in their own terms. If the Liberation Panthers wish to 'democratise democracy' in India, then they need to critically examine their own modes of organisation. Focussing on the key issues of gender and leadership the chapters in this section analyse both the promises and the practices of the movement in question. Often the most salient social divide is that of gender. Chapter 6 considers the role of Dalit women, questioning how they interact with Dalit movements, challenge the patriarchal nature of movements and activists, and seek to make themselves heard in, predominantly male space. Although the role of women is raised in most chapters, a separate analysis of Dalit women is justified since they suffer from cumulative oppression: by caste, by a patriarchal *society*, by capitalism, and often by their men within the home as well. Despite the numbers of women who take part in movement meetings, demonstrations and protests, women are under-represented at a leadership level and it is argued that this imbalance in power needs to be addressed since it constitutes a contradiction of the movement ideals.

In Chapter 7 I turn to a consideration of leadership. Dalit movements often revolve around the central figure of a leader who is cast as a spokesman, a hero and a protector. Given the participatory emphasis of movement demands, such modes of organisation appear to be contradictory. The emphasis on the leader, therefore, needs to be questioned. The prominence of a central individual may make the concept of charisma attractive, but - contrary to appearances - the DPI incorporates a number of mechanisms that serve to limit the absolute power of the leader and render him accountable to the members. The notion of charisma cannot capture the social relationships that underpin leadership and ignores the agency of the individual members. There are also several alternative visions of leadership, which pose a

challenge to this mode of organisation and seek to prefigure a more participatory society in their own movements. This concern highlights the fact that movements are pre-eminently about moral vision and social change.

During the course of my fieldwork movements moved away from extra-institutional protest as a means of change and began to adopt the weapons of parliamentary democracy. Chapters 8 and 9, in the fourth section, present an analysis of this process, and an examination of the movement's first foray into electoral competition. There are powerful incentives to adopt the path of democratic contention, but the pitfalls, of which the movements were initially wary, have not disappeared. Entering the political arena can lead to co-option, compromise and corruption, each of which could alienate movement activists and lead them either into apathy or radicalism. The two chapters on the election comprehend over-lapping terrain, but they are examined separately here to emphasise the importance of the shift from extra-institutional protest to parliamentary participation. Chapter 8 discusses the DPI's transition from movement to party and the difficulties and debates involved in this process of transition. Here I analyse the process with reference to Offe's (1990) theory of institutional self-transformation. Whilst Offe's stage model is useful in the Tamil context, I highlight several significant differences that characterise the Indian experience. Chapter 9 builds upon these issues in an examination of the Lok Sabha elections of 1999. Focusing on questions of representation and recruitment, I examine the political context of the Liberation panther's entry into party politics. The election campaign highlighted the continuing salience of caste conflict and the exclusion of the Dalit community. It also emphasised the significance of 'events' in reconfiguring political opportunities. I argue that this election has helped to redraw the map of Tamil politics and extended the political process to hitherto excluded citizens.

In conclusion, Chapter 10 seeks to sum up the issues and ideologies that inform Dalit protest. It highlights the objectives and aspirations of Dalit activists before concluding with a critical appraisal of their impact in terms of Tamil society and politics. It is argued the DPI, and Dalit movements more generally, are helping to reconstitute civil society and democracy in India. Often working at great risk to themselves Dalit activists have sought to raise the plight of the downtrodden and fight for a just and equal society. They do not always live up to the ideals that they espouse, and they are

not always effective at defending their members from attack, or in securing justice. They do, however, serve as witnesses to continuing oppression and violence against those who continue to be associated with Untouchability, and are still among the lowest and poorest sectors of India's society. It is to their work and courage that this thesis is dedicated.

SECTION ONE:
Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

*I am a Dalit
With Proud chest
Raised Arms
Flexed Muscles
And Courage I say:
Yes!
I am a Dalit.*

*Because this is said
I am not embarrassed,
Nor am I distressed.
I am not enraged
Nor am I disgusted
However
Nor am I delighted by it.
With Courage I say:
Yes!
I am a Dalit*

(K. Subbaiah, Pondicheri. In *Dalit Mulukkam* Dec. 1998. Trans. Self)

CHAPTER ONE: MAPPING THE MOVEMENT

Methodological and Theoretical Considerations

I: THE DALIT PANTHER MOVEMENT

THE LIBERATION PANTHERS

The Dalit Panther Movement (DPM) was formed in Maharashtra in the late 1970s by a young generation of Dalits who were disillusioned with the existing Scheduled Caste parties and leaders. Their frustration found an expression in militant literature, poetry, painting and theatre as well as political agitation. They drew their inspiration, and title, from the Black Panther Movement in the United States (Joshi 1986: 87, Morkhandikar 1990: 586). The initial aggression and militancy of the DPM has waned, the movement split into several camps and most of the leaders are now in the Republican Party of India, but they have inspired the formation of several other movements and parties around India. In 1982 in Madurai a group of disaffected Dalits led by M. Malaichami formed a group called the *Dalit Panther Iyyakkam* (Movement) (DPI). Following the death of Malaichami in 1990 the former government official Mr R. Thirumavalavan succeeded him as DPI leader. As with their counterparts in the north, the DPI both built upon and expressed frustration with the work of those who had preceded them. Whilst the Ambedkar People's Movement (AMI) was acknowledged to have raised awareness about the issue of untouchability and taken the fight against caste discrimination onto the streets (as discussed in Chapter VII), it was increasingly depicted as being too close to established political parties. As Guruvijay Paraiyar, of the Paraiyar Peravai put it: "the old movements have become political brokers or agents. Y Balasundaram (the leader of the AMI) and Ellayaperumal (who founded a human rights organisation) are respected Dalit figures but they are not leaders, they have not brought about social change. The best they can do is to secure Government loans" (Interview 10/10/99). A number of the DPI cadre, notably the General Secretary 'Tada' Periyasami, had been active in radical Communist Party groups that organised against class and caste in Thanjavur. Over time, however, Dalit activists had come to question the commitment of the Communists to the caste struggle. Sankar, now an accountant in a handicraft shop in Madurai, related an instance in which he visited the district offices of the CPI in the 1970s.

"The leader was sitting in his office speaking to a deputation through the window when I came in. After the visitor had left I enquired who it was, and was informed that it was the head of the Scavengers' Trade Union. 'So, he is also a comrade', I said, why didn't he come into the office?' 'How can that be?' was the response, 'he is a scavenger'" (interview 5/12/1998).

Sankar, and many like him, came to the conclusion that the caste struggle needs to be resolved before a class struggle is even possible.⁸ Though the DPI was founded as a non-violent consciousness-raising organisation, its appeal has always hinged on its aggressive rhetoric and resistance to upper-caste dominance. Whilst the Liberation Panthers did stage demonstrations against the closure of Textile Mills and the unemployment of the workforce during my fieldwork, their focus was upon caste discrimination and conflict.

My historical knowledge about the DPI is lacking in detail and I have not been able to verify all of it. This is mainly due to the fact that activists paid little attention to the formal history of the organisation and, although I was repeatedly told that there was 'going to be' a booklet published about the movement, no such document was available during my fieldwork.⁹ From speeches and interviews I have established the basic facts given above, but my interviewees placed an overriding emphasis on the active movement rather than its past. This partly relates to the fact that many of the members had only joined the movement under the present leader, but also emphasise the exponential growth of the DPI under Thirumavalavan. For example, Perumal - a municipal worker in Madurai - insisted that he used to be arrested and harassed by the police but that now he is respected. "The main cause for this transformation is one man. I have his photo here - our leader Thirumavalavan - all this is his doing ... he is a saviour for us, a deity" (Interviewed 8/03/99). Absent from his account is any sense of the early movement. Likewise, in his speech to inaugurate a new branch of the DPI in Reitingpatti, Virudhunagar District, Thirumavalavan provided a potted version of

⁸ "Things like fraternity (*sakhotharar unnarchi*) and equality (*samunilai*) are central to the Dalit struggle" Kamaraj insisted, when I asked him whether he was attracted by the Communist Party. "But the communists don't do anything about that whereas we try to" (18/03/1999).

⁹ Although I was told that a booklet about the organisation would be published "soon" containing all the details that I wanted, the DPI resembled other movements in that there was no systematic record or documentation of the movement (cf Mageli 1997: 64, Diani 1992: 129 on other movements). Most of

the movement's emergence. Having mentioned the DPM in the north he continued, "this movement came to Madurai in 1982 under Malaichami. I came to Madurai and got to know him. In January 1990 unfortunate circumstances led me to take up the leadership of the movement and since then we have met fierce repression." (Speech 07/08/99). The past is considered briefly as a prelude, but the present is very much the focus as if to erase the memory of times when the movement was not so strong or well established.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Under Thirumavalavan the DPI has also come to be known as the Liberation Panthers (*Viduthulai Ciraithukkal*). The name is instructive on two counts. On the one hand it is an obvious reference to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka. Several of the DPI activists carried small photos of Prabhakaran and the conflict in Sri Lanka was occasionally referred to as an indication of the violence that could occur if their demands were not met.¹⁰ On the other hand the name points to problems associated with the term 'Dalit'.¹¹ At a flag-raising ceremony in July 1999, Thirumavalavan appeared to reject the term, maintaining that "today we have given ourselves a new name: The Liberation Panthers" (18/07/99). The attempt to escape the Dalit tag occurred for three stated reasons. Firstly "everyone now is using the name 'Dalit'", and so it is seen to have lost the radicalism that was associated with it and become an ascribed name rather than an epithet of choice. Secondly, there was a suggestion that Dalit was becoming a caste term in Tamilnadu where it was used as a code word for Paraiyar. Thirdly, as the DPI

my interviewees had also joined the movement under the leadership of the present incumbent and spoke more about Thirumavalavan than his predecessor.

¹⁰ During my fieldwork there were no systematic references made to the LTTE and none of my respondents (either DPI or not) said that there were any links between the organisations. It appeared to be more of a symbolic gesture than a meaningful comparison of issues/strategies. It is also worth noting that the most overtly pro-LTTE political party in TN was the *Paatali Makkal Katchi* which is opposed to the DPI. Lipsky (1970: 186), however, notes the advantages, for movement leaders, of suggesting that they have a "large group of passionate followers willing to take risks".

¹¹ There is a trend for movements to discard any pretensions towards Dalit unity and organise on the basis of their immediate community. Movements, such as the *Paraiyar Peravai* (Paraiyar Front) or the *Arundathiar Nalla Iyyakkam* (Arundathiar Welfare Movement) have, thus, confined their demands to the particular interests of their own caste. Guru (1993), Suresh (1996), and Duncan (1999), in different contexts, note the attraction of organising along caste rather than Dalit lines. Whilst the DPI has maintained the term 'Dalit', many participants and opponents regard them as primarily a Paraiyar organisation. One of the underlying issues considered in the text relates to whether the DPI should be seen as a caste movement or not. These criticisms, however, apply equally to established political parties.

grew in strength in Tamilnadu they felt the need to distance themselves from the increasingly divided Maharashtra Dalit Panthers. The first and last reasons are the best founded, since Dalit *has* become a ubiquitous term of reference that *categorises* people rather than reflecting their own self-definitions. By coining a new name, therefore, the DPI are attempting to recapture the revolutionary import of the original Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra. Despite this I have described the DPI as a Dalit movement, partly to facilitate comparison with other studies, but also to reflect the continuing use of the acronym 'DPI' alongside the name Liberation Panthers, and their continuing campaigns on 'Dalit' platforms and conferences. The alteration in name, thus, is more significant in its assertion of autonomy and radicalism, than as heralding a shift in worldview or practice.

The new name also emphasises the influence of the present leader, but despite the apparent importance of the alteration in leadership I could find little information about the process of succession. Whilst Palani Kumar spoke about elections, the internal democracy of the movement is decidedly lacking and there are no transparent procedures for the election of leaders. Local level activists work their way up the movement hierarchy by engaging in organising activity and making best use of the opportunities to address demonstrations. It is instructive that Thirumavalavan got to know Malaichami because he went to law college with the former leader's brother. As shown in Chapter VII, Thirumavalavan gained popularity through his unquestioned abilities as an orator and the aggressive content of his speeches. Given that the defining feature of the DPI for over a decade was its 'radical electoral boycott', he was the obvious choice to act as the spokesperson and figurehead of the movement. Under his leadership the DPI has become one of the two foremost Dalit organisations in the state. The lack of transparency and accountability noted in the choice of a leader, however, is evident in the entire operation of the movement.

MOVEMENT ORGANISATION

On the face of it the DPI is highly structured and well organised. This consists of the 'Convenor' Thirumavalavan and two 'General Secretaries' - 'Tada' Periyasami and Cinthanai Selvam - all of whom travel around the state meeting different movement branches. Closer to the ground there are a number of 'Assistant General Secretaries' who are responsible for setting up meetings and keeping abreast of issues and events

in their area. Sakhtivel, for instance, was in charge of Madurai and Melur districts. He was responsible for organising meetings and addressing problems in this area as well as more high profile occasions such as the commemoration of the Melavalavu massacre. The 'high command' is backed up by several District Secretaries and co-ordinators who, in turn, keep in touch with city representatives, women's wing leaders and prominent activists. This skeletal structure serves to keep the movement from disbanding altogether and means that there is almost always someone senior and experienced to seek help from. It is, however, unclear what the precise relations of power between these senior positions are. As shown in Chapter VII the pre-eminent focus on the figure of the leader often serves to detract from the contribution of others.¹² These offices also, do not correspond to a transparent hierarchy of command. Frequently local activists took decisions of their own accord and only referred to senior leaders if problems arose. Beyond these central figures, furthermore, both positions in the movement and ties between participants are purely informal. This 'organic' form of organisation is evident from my fieldnotes:

The DPI extends into 40 'wards' of Madurai City. A movement 'ward' is marked by the presence of a flagpole, painted board (or both) with the colours (sky blue, red and white) and emblem (panther) of the DPI, an obligatory portrayal of Dr Ambedkar and usually a depiction of the movement leader. Each ward has its own committee which is "elected locally", according to Palani Kumar, which handles local issues. Informal contact is maintained through occasional (by no means regular) visits, notices of forthcoming events, and discussions at meetings as and when they occur. When asked if there were meetings on a monthly basis or some such mechanism to meet up, Palani Kumar replied: "No, nothing like that, ... but we should do". When asked how he contacted those outside his immediate neighbourhood he asserted that "when there are problems or difficulties, then they come to us" [Fieldnotes26/03/99].

¹² It was partly this issue which led Tada Periyasami to lead a break-away faction out of the DPI in 2002. (Palani Kumar, personal communication. See also Hindu Jan 22, 2002). There were premonitions of this during my field-work. Most notably from the Madurai city convenor, Kannadasan, who asked for a photo to be taken of him and others and not "just of MGR" (a derogatory reference to the focus on Thirumavalavan).

The fact that my visit to various wards in Madurai provided an opportunity for the local level organisers to catch up with what was happening led me to be somewhat sceptical of the claims that elections were held. As an organisation the DPI lacked the records and details of members to ensure that such an election could take place, or if it did that it would be representative. The meetings to discuss the move into political competition, for example, were constituted of those key activists that had the time and money to attend rather than elected representatives. Although DPI activists spoke of the probability that they would develop membership cards and dues, there was no evidence of such administration in 1999. In many villages around Madurai and in the city itself the board or flagpole often appeared to be the only evidence of movement activity.

The DPI is a radical movement based around core cells in the Dalit populated areas of cities such as Madurai and Cuddalore. Each cell is more or less connected to the District organiser through a network of informal ties and contacts. There is no structure set up to bring the local bodies and the main organisation together. It is noticeable that the further afield from the cities one goes the looser the links become. In the villages over an hour away from Madurai these connections are delicately maintained by threads of trust, family networks, informal visits by the regional organisers and posted notices about impending events (Fieldnotes 27/03/1999).

Given the informal nature of the ties between participants and the lack of membership cards, or joining up fees, there is some ambiguity as to how to define the movement. There are, however, certain recurrent 'rituals' and events that serve to give the DPI coherence as a movement and to distinguish them from others.¹³ These constitute the informal 'rules of the game' that apply not only to the Liberation Panthers but are discernible in organisations across the country. Firstly, an area or group of people mark their association to the movement by erecting a flag or painted board with the colours and emblems of the movement in question emblazoned across them. Movement membership, thus, is an act of public affirmation. Such flag-raising events

¹³ My use of 'ritual' here draws on the work of social movement theorists. Taylor and Whittier (1995: 176) for example define rituals as: "Symbolic expressive events that communicate something about social relations in a relatively dramatic way".

make a public statement as well as reinforcing the sense of unity upon which the movement depends. New groups or members are usually the ones who initiate contact with a movement. They approach movement activists having heard of the work of the movement or having suffered caste discrimination in their locality. As Palani Kumar suggested, it is rare for the movement itself to actively campaign for new members.¹⁴ Once they have contacted the DPI several prominent activists in the vicinity are assigned to visit the new area and tell them about the movement and help organise for an inaugural meeting. The flag-raising symbolises the inauguration of a new ward of the DPI. Ideally the leader is in attendance to hoist the flag or unveil the board, meet people in the locality, and then make a speech. Membership in the movement affords local areas a sense that they are part of a wider, stronger group and it acts as a deterrent to higher castes in the vicinity. It also fosters a sense of being part of the Dalit struggle for 'liberation' and equality. The movement gets exposure, a larger pool of people to raise funds from and a sense that the movement is growing and getting stronger. Beyond that the relation between the movement and the ward varies according to circumstance and key individuals. Notices of impending events are sent to the contact person in each ward and they are expected to inform their neighbourhood and, for particularly prestigious events, they are pressured to provide a contingent of people to make up numbers. This latter task relies upon social rather than formal pressure and attendance at demonstrations fluctuates widely.¹⁵

THE APPEAL OF THE PANTHERS

As shown above it is usually an area that approaches a movement, rather than *vice versa*, which begs the question: why join the DPI as opposed to the many other movements in the state? Speaking to members and participants it was apparent that the DPI were so successful because they were aggressive, spoke of fighting back and had an articulate leader with an attractive public image. The two most quoted aspects that were said to typify this radicalism were the ten-year election boycott and the slogan promising to return a blow for a blow. Previous Dalit movements in the state

¹⁴ As shown in Chapters 8 and 9, when the DPI contested the election in 1999 they were forced to reassess this mode of operation.

¹⁵ Attendance at DPI demonstrations whilst I was there varied between 75 people clustered round a microphone to the 2,000 or so in Melavalavu. This latter figure is misleading, however, in that many movements were involved in the memorial at Melevalavu. The average attendance was around 250-350 but the crowds drawn for election meetings were much higher. Members and non-members alike said that the DPI had held vast demonstrations in Madras, but I was not witness to any of these.

had campaigned against untouchability through legal means. Groups like the Ambedkar People's Movement (AMI) were often innovative and *socially* revolutionary but they did not challenge the political establishment. The DPI, by contrast, rejected the parliamentary process as a sham and called for more radical change. When even the poorest Dalits are articulating a sense of injustice and demanding their dignity, as shown in Chapter III, it is not surprising that the more militant movements are the more popular. Through its boycott of the elections, the DPI effectively equated the inefficiency and corruption of established politics with the perpetuation of caste discrimination. It followed, therefore, that Dalits should take the law in to their own hands. As Perumal, from Melavassel, put it: "The main cause of our problems is the police. Police first and Upper Castes second. They are turning us into guerrillas" (Interview 8/03/99).

The percentage of Dalits engaged in protest is not high but, as the above quote suggests, the risks that they run are disproportionate to any tangible gains that they can reasonably expect. To ignore the issues that inspire participation and hold out the prospect of a different society, therefore, would be mistaken. When asked why they had decided to join a given movement, most members would cite the figure of the leader as the main cause. But when asked why they chose to protest at all, people had an abiding and articulated sense of injustice. This means that whilst the leaders may be idolised they are never beyond reproach if they are seen to betray the cause.¹⁶ Movement action is intended to educate people as much as to make a point, and activists were remarkably well informed about core issues and current affairs. Without an understanding of these demands it is impossible to fully appreciate movement strategies, or gauge how 'successful' they have been. The importance accorded to each issue varied over time, and campaigns on one particular issue did not necessarily reflect the pre-eminence of that cause. Political convenience can be as important for the timing of a campaign as ideology. The demand for a 'share of power', for example, is fundamental to the Dalit movements' attempts to fashion a different society and yet the DPI only voiced it with any conviction when the opportunity to enter the polls arose. Likewise, the stress on Human Rights in 1999 was not

¹⁶ The validity of this claim was reinforced early in 2002 when the DPI itself split into two opposing factions.

inconsistent with prior campaigns, but its prominence owed more to the 50th anniversary of the UNDHR than any internal decision.

Dalit movements have consistently struggled for social inclusion. The exclusion of Dalits from the main body of society is symbolised on many fronts. Physically the *cheris* are located outside the main village; semantically they are referred to as ‘untouchable’; spiritually, Dalits are denied access to temples, told that they are impure, and village processions refuse to enter the Dalit areas. Materially, Dalits are alienated from resources and land, culturally their skills are demeaned, and socially they are served in different receptacles at restaurants. One of the defining issues confronting the DPI, therefore, is the demand for equality of access to the social sphere.¹⁷ Bound up with this struggle for social respect and recognition, is the call for *self-respect*. DPI activists portray many educated and well-off Dalits as lackeys because they do not actively support the rest of their community. S. Martine, an advocate and co-founder of the Village Community Development Society, insisted on the need for self-respect and self-reliance. “Why do shops established by Dalits fail?” he asks. His answer is that the higher castes boycott such institutions, and members of their own community do not support them. Social attitudes depicting Dalits as dirty still pertain, and these need to be challenged *within* the Dalit community as well as the rest of society (S. Martine Interview 18/01/99).¹⁸ The emphasis upon honour and dignity in the speeches of movement leaders indicates the psychological significance of the DPI. The Dalit struggle, thus, is as much about building the self-esteem of the community as combating material oppression.

The demand for social inclusion, however, *is* fundamentally bound up with the struggle against political and economic exclusion; it is a demand for equal citizenship. The Nationalist struggle, according to this perspective remains incomplete whilst certain citizens are demeaned simply because of who they are. On the face of it the demand for social inclusion would appear to be met by the positive discrimination

¹⁷ The struggles to gain access to and recognition within social space are one of the defining aspects of the wider Dalit struggle. This was manifested most significantly in the mid-1930’s Temple Entry movements.

¹⁸ Chandra Bose, the leader of the *Tiyagi Immanuel Peravai* (TIP – Martyr Immanuel Front), also recounted the difficulties that Dalits have in setting up businesses. The higher castes, he says, “will not tell you that you cannot set up a hotel there, but if you do then they will not eat there nor will their

measures of the Indian Constitution. The DPI, however, point out that the façade is more impressive than the substance for the reservation system in general. They insist that it is not functioning efficiently or fairly, and that it has failed to filter down to most members of the Scheduled Castes even if we discount the fact that Muslim and Christian Dalits are not entitled to reservations. Political reservations are obviously more visible, and it would be impossible for any party not to field a Dalit candidate in a reserved seat. Politically speaking, therefore, Dalits *are* equal members of the polity. Reservation has now been extended to cover *panchayat* councils, so in theory Dalits have a voice in every level of government in India. In many areas and states, such decentralisation programmes have led to remarkable social alterations. The Liberation Panthers are obviously cognisant of this, and press for the adequate representation of Dalits on such bodies, but disillusionment with established parties has led to a steady move towards the establishment of autonomous parties.

Whilst parliamentary politics are, of necessity, mediated, the injunction on Dalit leaders to be one of the people renders them much more aware of the needs and desires of their community than career politicians are likely to be. When the Liberation Panthers joined the TMC Front in 1999, their demand for a 'share of power' rather than an alliance, reflected the ideological commitment to *self-determination*, which entails both access to common properties and a place in decision-making bodies (S. Martine interview: 18/01/99). The DPI's continual demand for separate electorates, however, reflects the fact that few constituencies have sufficient Dalit voters to enable movements to win in open competition.¹⁹ Aside from the problems associated with the first past the post system of politics, the partial successes of autonomous Dalit political parties must be placed in the context of Dalit poverty. It is difficult to 'organising the unorganised', since the primacy of day to day survival is paramount (Francis 1993).²⁰ "Rather than thinking about the paradise of

social group, so it will become a loss making business" (Interview 23/02/99). He calls this a modern form of untouchability.

¹⁹ "A joint electorate for a small minority and a vast majority is bound to result in a disaster to the minority. A candidate put up by the minority cannot be successful even if the whole of the minority were solidly behind him... Even if a seat is reserved for a minority, a majority can always pick up a person belonging to the minority and ... get him elected... The result is that the representative of the minority elected to the reserved seat instead of being a champion of the minority is really a slave of the majority" (Dr. Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5, page 347).

²⁰ Shri Rangan Prakash of the Republican Party of India (T.N) stressed that the BSP policy of 'one rupee, one vote' (Meaning that each member should pay one rupee per month) was not feasible in

tomorrow”, as Chandra Bose put it, “they want an end to today’s hunger” (Interview 23/02/99). The land reforms of the 1950’s and 1960’s have been largely ineffective, and the majority of Dalits in the state still do not own any land. This renders them dependent upon others for employment, and makes them vulnerable to social boycott. It is not surprising, therefore, that land remains the core concern for the DPI and many other Dalit movements.²¹

MOVEMENTS AND INSTITUTIONS: DALITS AND THE NGOS

Lack of funds also dictates an over-reliance on volunteers. This fosters feelings of sacrifice and self-denial amongst activists that strengthen internal bonds but alienate them from others in society. Movement activists face constant pressures to settle down, get married and get a steady job so as to contribute towards their family. There is a perennial tension in such situations between Non-Governmental Organisations, many of which have overseas funding, and protest movements. Karunakaran, an activist from Andhra Pradesh, insisted that the proliferation of NGOs had had a debilitating effect on the people’s movements in that state (Interview 13/01/99). “NGOs” he maintained, “are not grassroots organisations, they are merely funding bodies with a Grassroots façade. They are not people based, spontaneous movements. The Dalit Movements here had people’s support”. He blamed NGOs for raising expectations and for producing activists who are motivated by cash rather than ideology. This situation has yet to emerge in Tamil Nadu where NGOs and movements work in concert on many issues. The growing links to political parties, however, does show some evidence of replicating this situation in Tamilnadu. Where NGOs are concerned, the publication of well-researched and systematic reports by the better-equipped institutions provides the information with which movements can castigate the government.²² It also adds an air of objectivity to the subjective outbursts of the protest groups. Since they are not in direct competition with any of the rival

Tamil Nadu. Not that the sums were beyond most people, but that it was difficult enough to motivate people to protest, let alone to ask for money on top of that.

²¹ The most prominent agitation has been for the reclamation of *Panchami* land; the acreage ceded to the Dalits by the British government to uplift the community. Petitions and land grab protests have been launched to try and reclaim this land, and some successes have been achieved, but the legal processes involved render the acquisition of the land a slow and tedious task.

²² On the 1st December 1999, for example, Thirumavalavan and other Dalit leaders from Tamilnadu addressed the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights’ conference at the Madras School of Social Work. He praised the organisation for releasing a “Black Paper” on reservations in the state and said that it provided an answer to the question of how movements and institutions could profit from allying together. “You can conduct research on behalf of movements” he told the panel.

organisations, NGOs can also provide forums for issue-based debate and interaction. DPI activists occasionally voiced resentment that NGOs profited from the cause that they were devoting their lives to, and wished that the funds obtained by such institutions were shared out more evenly. Yet it is these organisations that have been able to organise the unorganised sectors of the employment market. Rickshaw Drivers, domestic workers, municipal workers and tri-cycle workers have all been unionised thanks to the efforts of institutional organisations.²³

The Liberation Panthers are perhaps best described as *issue based*, in that they articulate a coherent set of principles and demands, but *incident sensitive* – in that they often react to the aggression of others rather than campaign on issues. This is not necessarily a criticism, since the highlighting of abuses is a crucial part of the search for justice. Violence can, however, restrict movements to a narrow agenda, and may force them back upon their own caste or community.²⁴ Pre-existing networks of kinship and neighbourhood do facilitate the process of organisation, but castes are *not* a homogenous category and are divided by gender, class, generation and region.²⁵ It is very ambitious to unite all the castes that are categorised as ‘Dalit’, and it is even more difficult to convince the Backward Castes that they share common interests with the SCs.²⁶ Potential solidarity is jeopardised by political rhetoric that is hardly suited to the subtleties of inter-caste understanding. Caste names are used to castigate certain communities, thus reinforcing the boundaries of mistrust and antipathy. Although the DPI campaign in the 1999 elections was aimed at minority groups of all castes, they found it almost impossible to escape their categorisation as a radical *Dalit* organisation. This caste-based polarisation has not, however, served to unite all the

²³ The more detached perspective of NGOs, Churches and National Political Parties means that they can also engage in activities that have less immediate impact, but which are consistent with the ideological objectives of the movement. The Dalit Resource Centre, thus, sponsors an annual Dalit Arts Festival (*Kalai Villa*), maintaining that, “The Cultural Revolution is a part of the struggle”. By emphasising the value of traditionally despised art forms, such programmes not only assert the dignity and skill of the artists, they also challenge the notion that Dalits do not have a distinct cultural heritage. Access to funds, staff, and infrastructure enables these bodies to engage in organisational activity, and this should be seen as a resource rather than a threat.

²⁴ . “The targeting of particular caste groups for political mobilisation”, as Duncan notes, “remains an attractive prospect for any party or movement” (1999: 55).

²⁵ “Even among the agricultural labourers”, as Francis observes, “there are different categories such as casual, bonded, permanent and contractual labourers. Their interests vary and, therefore, it is difficult to unite them on a particular issue” (1993: 109).

²⁶ The Maharashtra Dalit Panthers of India’s definition of ‘Dalit’ included all the oppressed sectors of society regardless of their caste status (Manifesto in Joshi 1986), but such unity has never been realised.

Scheduled Castes. Tellingly both newspapers and people on the ground portrayed the DPI as *Dalit* in relation to established parties, but as *Paraiyar* when comparing them to the mostly *Pallar* Puthiya Tamizhagam. Issue or incident based link-ups between Dalit movements have only had short-term success.²⁷

Various Dalit movements have been most united in the wake of numerous, well-documented, cases of police atrocities against the Dalits. DPI activists regard such acts as state policy – trying to stem the rise of a radical and autonomous Dalit organisation - but it is as likely that the police force merely reflects its own caste constituency. The police in India are not divorced from the communities of their birth, and they do not leave their prejudices behind them when they enter the force. The DPI has come into increasing conflict with the state apparatus, however, as it has assumed overtly political positions. Increasing levels of political awareness have soured the relationship between Dalits and the state. Dalits are no longer content to be the recipients of state-sponsored programmes but are demanding an active role in politics and a share of power. This brings Dalits into conflict with those in office, as it mounts a challenge to their interests and deprives them of electoral support. Hitherto, Dalits have tended to be seen as voters who were easily swayed and could be bought off at election time with promises and hand-outs.

Given the increasingly organised nature of the community such measures are now perceived to be out-moded. Most political parties, therefore, seek alliances with Dalit organisations and all display images of Ambedkar on their campaign material. As yet, however, Dalit movements are neither established nor strong enough to contest the elections independently and so they are in a fairly weak position when it comes to negotiating alliances. The DPI consequently embarked upon a boycott of the elections, but this stance allowed them to be cast as a threat to democracy. Once branded as a threat to society existing laws were employed to clamp down on them and alienate them from the masses. During 1998 and 1999 over fifty DPI activists were remanded under various national security and anti-terrorism Acts, let alone countless ‘preventative arrests’. Such arrests both deterred members from engaging in

²⁷ This is not just an issue for Dalit movements. Speaking of social movements across India Sethi notes that: “So long as the issue is live and important, groups can disregard differences of ideology and approach, but as soon as it loses force, the alliance breaks down” (Sethi 1993: 242).

civil disobedience, but also constructed the DPI as a threat to peace – thus deterring others from joining the movement. This reputation made it more difficult to secure police permission for political protests, demonstrations and rallies. Deprived of these means of reaching the public and articulating their grievances on a wider stage the movement was faced by the choice of an escalation of radicalism or a reappraisal of their approach. The DPI opted to participate in the processes of established politics; they entered into negotiations with various electoral coalitions and ultimately decided to contest the 1999 elections under the banner of the *Tamizh Maanila Congress* (TMC – Tamil State Congress). State suppression, thus, has fuelled the gradual institutionalisation of the Liberation Panthers. They have sought to form an autonomous Dalit party that better represents the interests of their community, but the logistics of electoral competition has induced the movement to seek alliances with established parties.

Forging an alliance with a political party and entering the parliamentary process, however, challenged the identity upon which the movement was built by accepting the system that it had hitherto portrayed as corrupt and corrupting. Movements entering parliamentary politics may have to abandon some demands and principles since they will be the junior party in any alliance. This process led to a crisis of identity for the DPI and ultimately resulted in the movement splitting into two different camps. In the short-term, however, this strategy resolved issues of funding and offered a path out of the problems posed by exclusive rhetoric. Identity politics can lead to the creation of defensive enclaves and reinforce communal divisions, but where it is used as a vehicle to political participation it contains the seeds of its own diffusion. Because the Dalits cannot win in elections on their own, entering the political process requires them to negotiate with other groups. There is a tendency for protest movements to get carried away with their revolutionary character to the extent that they neglect the painstaking processes of negotiation and lobbying.²⁸ As Dietrich observes, however, it is often the persistent chasing up of officials and harrying of bureaucrats that produces results, rather than the grand demonstration that disrupts traffic for a day and gives the cadres a sense of power (Personal communication).

²⁸ “In failing to recognise that all politics operates in the arena of compromises and deals and addresses itself to what is potentially realisable, revolutionary purism ends up painting State structures and processes in fortress-like terms that are amenable only to assault and smashing” (S. Kothari 1990: 12).

This is not to say that Dalit movements should abandon the objective of radical structural change. Far from it, for “without affecting the well-being of the dominant caste”, as Chandra Bose enquires, “how will the lowest caste get a solution?” (Interview 23/02/99). The question rather, regards the best means to achieve that end. In the current political climate it is arguable that more can be achieved by acting as the radical conscience of the democratic system than by allowing the militant tag to stick. When I arrived in India, to begin my fieldwork, the DPI were vehemently opposed to participating in the ‘flawed structures of government’. A combination of shifts in the political opportunity structure, state and caste repression, and the will of the Dalit people forced them to reassess that position. During my research I observed the *process* of transition from radical movement to junior partner in a coalition. This process was instructive as an indication of the political opportunity structure, but also as an insight into the mechanisms through which movement policy is debated and decided. Further research is required to assess the extent to which this move will result in the institutionalisation of the DPI and whether it will be able to retain its reputation for radicalism. The DPI’s involvement in the political machinations attending the state elections in 2001 has certainly been a source of disillusionment for many observers. If political participation results in ‘more of the same’, they argue, then the objectives of the movement will have been betrayed. This thesis argues that despite the compromises engendered by electoral calculations, the Liberation Panthers and movements like them have constituted a meaningful force for socio-political change in the state. In this sense they are helping to ‘democratise democracy’ in India.

II: THE FIELD SITES

ISSUES OF ACCESS

The fieldwork on which this study is based was conducted in the South Indian State of Tamil Nadu, for 12 months between November 1998 and November 1999. Dalit movements are active in this region, but they have not received the recognition accorded to their counterparts elsewhere in the country. The particular historical development of politics in Tamil Nadu rendered this state an ideal research site because, since the 1920s, parties that have been ideologically committed to social

equality have dominated the political environment.²⁹ I was based in the central city of Madurai. I built upon existing contacts in the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary (TTS), which has good links to several movements that are active in the locality. Despite this, the immediate difficulties that I encountered were those of access. Social movement participants are very conscious of being part of a group and they are more wary of researchers prying into their organisation than most individuals. Each person I interviewed quizzed me first about my credentials for doing the research, the reasons why I was interested in the subject, and what I hoped to achieve with the study. Some leaders and activists were extremely defensive about their movements and were reluctant to open themselves up to criticism. Others were wary of being associated with a foreigner, for fear of accusations that they were getting outside funds. Furthermore, access to certain movements was barred by reluctance on my part. Several movements had a forbidding image, and my friends portrayed them as violent organisations. Without some form of introduction it was impossible to intrude myself upon them.

Initially, therefore, my contacts were largely limited to the Dalit Liberation Movement (DLM), the *Tamizhaga* Dalit Liberation Movement (DLM) and *Penurimai Iyyakkam* (PI – Women’s Rights Movement) as these were the groups in which I knew activists and leaders. My first three months in the field was spent in libraries and with members of the aforementioned movements, gaining an insight into the important issues and the modes of organisation. During this interim stage I became acquainted with the context and extent of Dalit action in and around Madurai. Two months into my stay in India I moved from the Seminary campus into a ‘Dalit colony’ in the village of Kosuvangundu, which is connected to TTS because some of the seminary workers live there and because it has close links with the Rural Theological Institute. The village was located 12 kilometres outside Madurai and my intention was to live with Dalits and attuning myself to their concerns. It soon became apparent that caste was a sensitive issue that people were not happy to talk about in detail. Those who got to know me were delighted to have an ‘English friend’, but were much less comfortable with my role as a researcher. Dalits here recurrently stated that there were no caste issues in the village because they were too strong. Untouchability, if it

²⁹ See Irschick (1969), Barnett (1976), Washbrook (1976), and Subramanian (1999) for more detailed and historical analyses of politics in the state.

existed here, manifested itself in the supposed compartmentalisation of village affairs into Dalit shops and non-Dalit shops. Issues surrounding the use of water had reportedly been solved after previous disputes, by the provision of separate water pumps in various areas of the village. Occupations varied between agriculture, people working in the local dying industry and those who travelled into Madurai to work in construction, garments, or service industries. The predominant complaints from Dalits were about poor conditions of work.

Despite this apparent lack of caste conflict and enmity, the Dalits of Kosuvangundu were organising themselves together along the lines of a social movement. The putative form of social organisation in the village was centred round the festivities that increasingly mark April the 14th as Ambedkar's birthday. Each Dalit household in the village contributed a small amount of money in order to enable them to mark the day with some food, games and speeches. The conscientisation of Kosuvangundu's Dalits owed much to the work of activists connected to TTS and was not completely 'organic'. It did not, in other words arise solely from the immediate concerns and grievances of the villagers. This was apparent in April 1999 when the villagers unveiled a flag and board not of any particular movement, but as a symbolic assertion of their independence. Yet, when I asked individuals what the point of their gesture was they were united in their support for the action. 'This will show that we are not slaves', was the common sentiment (Murugan 12/04/99). When I pressed them further and asked why they were not affiliating themselves to any particular movement, people replied that they had 'no need to belong to any particular movement just now'. Some of the younger men in the village disapproved of this stance. They insisted that just because they were doing well did not mean that they should not join a more active movement, such as the DPI. After a month in Kosuvangundu I reflected the urban bias of Dalit movement activity by returning to the city. The Liberation Panthers were the most significant movement in Madurai, in terms of numbers, visibility and reputation.

THE MADURAI PANTHERS

Melavassel, the housing unit adjacent to the central bus-stand in Madurai, is populated mainly municipal workers. Despite the fact that these are government workers, the nature of the occupations – cleaning, sweeping, rubbish collection – means that the inhabitants are all Dalits. More specifically most of the residents are from either the

Paraiyar or Chakkiliyar castes. Melavassel is a sprawling estate and the roads into the three storey flats are lined with houses. There are three entrances to Melavassel off the main road that all the corporation buses travel along. The first, as one comes round the one-way system and heads into town, is fairly nondescript. The second has an archway built over it, which is painted with the emblems and name of the *Tamizhaga Arunthathiya* Youth Front (TAYF). The board is getting old now and the paint is somewhat faded. Driving further along the road one passes murals on the walls to the Communist Party of India, the AIADMK and the DMK, each of which has a small enclosure built around them. Standing out from the compound wall on the verge of the road is a tall flagpole embedded in a concrete plinth. The red, white and blue markings of the pole show that it does not belong to any of these organisations, even though it could be said to be encroaching on their space. It belongs to the DPI. A few yards further on, above the main entrance to the estate and located opposite the three-star Hotel Tamilnadu, there is a huge, painted billboard proclaiming its allegiance to the Liberation Panthers. As detailed in Chapter V, the size of the flag and board are social barometers of the popularity of a given movement. The freshness of the paint suggests the more recent popularity of the DPI but it also symbolises the strength and activism of the respective organisations. Whilst the TAYF is past its peak of mobilisation, in other words, the DPI is in the ascendant.

PURSUING THE PANTHERS

Despite these signposts advertising the presence of the DPI, gaining access to them was hampered partly by their reputation as violent (compounded by the reputation of Melavassel itself), and partly by a lack of contacts to people in the movement. There appeared to be little interaction between members of different Dalit movements even where, as in the case of the Liberation Panthers and the *Tiyagi Immanuel Peravai* (TIP – Martyr Immanuel's Front), the leaders of the two organisations got on well together. Gaining access to one movement, therefore, was more likely to preclude access to another than enhance it. Though the disparate Dalit organisations have issues, ideologies and concerns in common, they can also be very protective of their own constituencies. It is telling, therefore, that my initial contact with the DPI was at a National Alliance of People's Movements' meeting. This was held in the Centre for Social Analysis of TTS. The meeting was about Globalisation and Monsanto and I had been asked to translate some of the discussion into Tamil. Most of those present

were affiliated to the seminary, but one of those in attendance was a member of the Liberation Panthers from Muduvarpatti called Kamaraj. Kamaraj, at the time, was an unemployed activist who had come along to the meeting out of interest rather than as a representative of the movement. It was through his intervention that I gained access to the DPI and also embarked on a multi-sited ethnography of the Liberation Panthers.

Getting to know a member of the movement was essential as a means of establishing my credentials and gaining access to a variety of movement actors. Without the informal contact established prior to the beginning of my research into the DPI it is unlikely that I could have collected as much detail or gained as much insight. Kamaraj was instructive, both as an informant but more so as an example. Observing the way in which he interacted with friends and comrades (*thozhar* – the word that he used) made it abundantly clear that movement activity does not occur in a separate sphere to everyday life. Rather, the day to day meetings, cups of coffee and discussions constitute the ties that bind people to each other, to the leader and to the wider cause. Not all the conversations of the movement members concerned Dalits or other concerns of the DPI. Members would gather together and talk as friends on subjects as diverse as politics, cinema, the weather and the mango season. A methodological approach that privileged focus group findings, or the results of questionnaires and interviews, would neglect the informal networks and social ties that both hold a movement together and serve to constitute the movement itself. Without such informal gatherings the DPI did not have the administrative wherewithal to mount the public demonstrations, marches, petitions and political campaigns through which they attempt to effect social change. Throughout my fieldwork, therefore, ‘hanging out’ with activists and hangers on was a vital part of the research.

MOVEMENT GEOGRAPHY

The study was directed, to a great extent, by social movement activists, and the events that occurred during my stay. I met many movement activists in the city and conducted most interviews and participant observation in Madurai District. Despite this, however, I was persuaded not to conduct a more conventional ethnography based on one particular site within the city itself. The reasons for this were manifold. The ambiguity of social movement boundaries and a lack of formal membership precluded

the isolation of a bounded field of study.³⁰ Activists from Madurai frequently travelled elsewhere to attend movement-related meetings, protests, or functions. For me to have remained static in my 'field site', would have meant that I could not chart vital aspects of movement organisation, and the costs of membership. Simply put, the movement spanned the entire state, and many movement members travelled long distances to attend meetings or to maintain contact. Kamaraj, for instance, regularly travelled the 23 km into Madurai to liaise with comrades in Melavassel. Most of my respondents had at some stage been to Chennai in order to attend a mass show of strength – they spoke of commandeering train carriages and travelling en masse so as not to have to buy train tickets.

When Thirumavalavan stood for election in Chidambaram over 50 volunteers from Madurai went to campaign on his behalf.³¹ More routinely Kamaraj and Palani Kumar (the Melavassel ward leader) visited other DPI 'cells' in the city and in the outskirts from time to time, established activists were also asked to hold 'classes' for prospective new members/wards, and to speak at regional meetings. For the duration of my fieldwork, there were also numerous occasions when movement leaders were called upon to visit the site of an atrocity, the scene of caste violence or the memorial of a fallen 'martyr'. The informal social networks that underpin movement organisation also marked personal events, turning marriages into movement

³⁰ No movement can adopt a wholly regional perspective, because they cannot ignore the common plight of Dalits elsewhere in India. The Liberation Panthers, thus, pasted posters of protest to condemn the killings in Bihar and Karnataka. Links were also asserted with other 'oppressed groups', thus the demolition of the Babri Masjid was condemned, as was the immolation of the Christian missionary and his sons in 1999. The internationalisation of Human Rights has enabled the Dalit community to appeal to a higher authority than the state, and to draw parallels with civil rights movements around the world. Mandela was frequently referred to as evidence of the power of prolonged and patient protest. More tangibly, the proliferation of Internet and international Dalit networks have provided movements with resources for consciousness raising and support. This was perhaps best evident in the UN conference on racism in Durban 2001 that was attended by several Dalit organisations including the leader of the DPI. On a more sustainable basis, the Dalit Liberation Movement has forged links with groups of 'untouchables' in Japan. These connections are most significant, not for the potential of material resources, but because they are a vital source of moral support and belief. By highlighting the worldwide concern about the Dalit struggle, such links emphasise the justice of the cause and hold up the comforting image of a vast coalition of solidarity and support networks.

³¹ Kamaraj and Palani Kumar claimed that many more than 50 had gone to campaign in the election but I was unable to verify their figure. At the very least 44 people from Madurai made the trek up to Chidambaram, since 43 of them were arrested in Neyveli (as reported in the Hindu, *Dhinna Malar*). Kamaraj informed me that he should have been amongst those arrested but he had left the building they were staying shortly before the police raid.

gatherings and house warming parties into social rituals.³² Movement activists, in other words, were rarely static and had I remained so I would have missed many of the interconnecting threads of movement activity. Furthermore, since the movements are consciously directed at non-members any sample of informants that failed to include non-movement members would have been incomplete.

As a consequence, I opted to travel around Tamilnadu both with key respondents and to key sites and events in order to reflect the spread of the movement, assess the influence of locality upon the participants, and better understand the organisation and impact of the Liberation Panthers. As the above discussion should indicate, by following participants to the diverse sites of movement activity, I was not imposing my own ideas about movement operation onto the group so much as reflecting their concerns. Although, in this attempt, I have lost some of the detail and minutiae that can emerge from long association with one particular place my object of study was not a particular group of people but the social movement itself. To have stayed in an established ward of the movement would have been to miss the critical 'rituals' and 'events' that inspire people to join a movement in the first place. This approach evolved from my engagement with Liberation Panthers in Melavassel, which became the base around which this study was built. Kamaraj and others impressed upon me the need to witness other places and other wards in order to get a fuller understanding of the movement. Their argument was that the motivation behind movement action lay in the precarious and threatened conditions of rural villages or less well established urban slums. To view the Dalit community from Melavassel was to see it from a position of strength. I was introduced to other wards in the city and told other stories and different trajectories of the DPI's development. In Chapter V, I discuss in more detail the visits to Keelathurai, SMP Colony, Jansi Rani Complex and other sites in Madurai City itself. Many of the activists encountered in these diverse settings became familiar to me from subsequent movement meetings. Madurai, however, is a city in which the DPI is well established. It is also a regional centre and so numerous protests and demonstrations occur within its boundaries. This means that activists can maintain contact with other wards, give support to each other and rally round in a time

³² An example of these informal ties that bind a movement together was Palani Kumar, the Secretary of a Madurai Branch of the DPI. He was frequently approached for advice on issues ranging from caste

of trouble. The Liberation Panthers in Madurai are vibrant, active and strong. An analysis of the movement from this perspective would have been unable to reflect the diversity of perspectives and experiences of movement activity that was gained by venturing further afield.

WHERE I WENT AND WHY

Most of the villages visited and the interviews conducted were not determined by myself. Various respondents took me to their home villages, I accompanied others when they visited places on behalf of the movement, and I also visited some scenes of caste violence and prejudice. Although I could not dictate the destinations I was not just confined to 'movement models' – villages where the movement was doing well and the leader was acclaimed as a hero. The research covered a diversity of locations and experiences as will become clear in the study. It was not, therefore, distorted by the direction of movement participants, rather it was given greater depth. Initially I was taken to villages within reach of the Madurai Corporation buses. I spent a week in Muduvarpatti from whence I visited Vadianpatti, Kodankipatti and Lingyapatti. All four villages are on the same bus route between 20 – 30 km out of Madurai. Most of the Dalits here are Paraiyar. Many commute into the city for work though others own small plots of land or work as agricultural labourers. Mangroves line the side of the road and provide both employment and sustenance for many of my respondents.³³ The villages here are arguably typical of the urban bias of the Liberation Panthers. Muduvarpatti, the closest village to Madurai, has a strong and militant DPI wing. Partly as a consequence of the caste composition of the village, where Dalits are a significant presence, the Liberation Panthers has taken root here and several of those active in the village regularly attend meetings and events in Madurai. As detailed in Chapter V, Muduvarpatti is seen as a DPI stronghold and it was here that the Dalits of Kodankipatti fled when they were attacked.

Further out from the city is the village of Vadianpatti. As mentioned earlier, the DPI presence here appears to be established, and a small structure with a roof over an open space has been constructed as a meeting point for the movement. At one end of the

discrimination, to securing loans and family matters. Not only was he literate, and able to draft official documents, but his experience of dealing with such cases was recognised and valued by others.

room the only wall of the '*manram*' (hall) is given over to a mural of Dr Ambedkar and a panther above which are placed photos of Thirumavalavan. This symbolic act of defiance and assertion, however, overlays a much less solid foundation. The movement members here felt abandoned by the movement and ongoing caste disputes, which had led to the Dalits being socially boycotted, had not been taken up by the DPI. Though Vadianpatti was merely 25 minutes cycle ride from Muduvarpatti, the lack of close informal and social connections to movement leaders made the distance appear greater. 2-3 kilometres along the track the Dalits of Kodankipatti had raised the flag of the DPI, only to see it uprooted. Dalits here were in a minority, were subject to social boycott, and came under attack from the higher castes during my fieldwork. Despite this, the Dalits had organised and had stood up to caste discrimination. Some six km further out, in Lingyapatti, even this putative form of resistance was absent and I was told that Dalits are still prevented from wearing shoes in the village let alone organising for social change. Interviews in these villages spanned the entire spectrum of DPI activity, from success to failure. The responses elicited in the outlying villages say more about the effectiveness of the movement than could have been ascertained in the confines of the city.

MOVING WITH THE MOVEMENT

The focus, thus, was on Madurai and its surrounds, but the movement extends further. It is often asserted in the press that the two largest Dalit movements in the state, the DPI and PT operate in different spheres. The DPI are said to be strongest in the north-east of the state, while PT predominates in the South and West. It is instructive that the leaders of both movements contested the 1999 elections from constituencies that reflected such analysis. As shown in chapters 8 and 9, however, the shift from movement agitation to political campaigning has required both the DPI and PT to attempt to expand their sphere of influence. Chapter V charts how competition between the two Dalit organisations reached new heights in 1999 when five people were killed in clashes between the two in Pudhupatti. This attempt to reach new participants is reflected in the spate of flag-raising and speeches conducted by Thirumavalavan between May and July of 1999. I was able to accompany Madurai Panthers to such events in an endeavour both to track the extent of the movement and

³³ Each meal I had in Muduvarpatti was flavoured with and accompanied by raw mangoes. There were few other fresh vegetables on offer.

to better understand the process by which new wards are organised and inducted into the movement. These trips took me South of Madurai, to Virudhunagar District and the village of Srivilliputhur, and south-east to the villages of Emeneswaram, Paramakudi and Sathirakudi in Ramnathapuram. These meetings marked the extension of the movement into new territory with ardent converts.

With the assistance of Reverend Paul Thomas, I was able also to visit the Liberation Panther heart-lands around Cuddalore, Chidambaram and Pondichery. Here the DPI has built on the prior efforts of the Communist Party to establish itself as an organised force. Their growth has impinged upon the constituency of various Republican Party of India (RPI) factions, and RPI leaders were united in condemning the tactics of the DPI. In Chidambaram and Myaladuthurai I was able to assess the impact of the Liberation Panther's election campaign and the violence that surrounded the polls. Only by visiting these areas could one perceive the differential impact of the incident based approach adopted by the DPI elsewhere and the proactive campaign mounted prior to the election. This raised issues pertaining to the movement's organisation, resources and *modus operandi*, that would not have otherwise emerged. Later, I attended protest meetings and interviewed Thirumavalavan in Chennai, the political capital of Tamilnadu and the place where the DPI leader resides. Seated outside the rented accommodation in K.K. Nagar, it was instructive to see people approaching for help, hangers on devoting themselves to following their leader and to meet other leading representatives of the movement and observe the interaction between them. In many ways this study has inverted the customary top-down approach to social movement research. Instead of listening to the leaders and then assessing their impact on the people, I interviewed the participants first, gained their trust and understood their commitment before meeting the central figure around whom they seemed to revolve. This way I could put their doubts to the leader in the form of questions and engage him in debate. Finally, no analysis of the DPI would be complete without visiting Melavalavu, the 'condensed symbol' both of the reasons for protest and the costs that may attend it. Melavalavu featured in most interviews, in almost every major speech and several of the projects undertaken by the DPI during my stay.

CASTE CONSTITUENCIES

In sum, the Liberation Panthers cover a large swathe of the state, stretching from Chennai down to Virudhunagar, and from Myaladuthurai across to Perambalur and Dindugal. They appeal mostly to Paraiyars, but the determination to resist branding as a caste movement has meant that significant numbers of Chakkiliyars and Pallars are attracted to the organisation. Although all three main Dalit castes are represented throughout the state their distribution broadly speaking mirrors that of the Dalit organisations. Paraiyars are preponderant in areas where the DPI is strongest, Pallars where the PT dominates in the South and West up from Thirunelveli to Coimbatore, and Arunthathiyars or Chakkiliyars in Dindugal, Erode, Dharmapuri and Karur have yet to establish a comparable political movement. These divisions ride rough-shod over the complexities of caste constituencies, movement alliances and allegiances and sub-caste differences, but they present a rough idea of the map of Dalit politics. Respondents frequently repeated this stereotypical portrait. Likewise it was constantly asserted that Pallars were the most organised Dalit caste, partly by virtue of superior land-holdings. They were said to look down upon the other Dalit castes and to perceive themselves as superior. This perception was given credence and substance by movements such as PT - the first Dalit movement to organise into a coherent political force in Tamilnadu – claiming to represent *Devendra Kula Vellalars*, rather than Pallars.

The Paraiyars make no pretensions to being ‘clean caste’, and several movements have inverted the stigma attached to the name by according it a certain cache. A number of activists – such as Guruvijay Paraiyar - have renamed themselves so as to emphasise their Paraiyar origins and organisations such as the Paraiyar Peravai (front/forum) tap into this sentiment. When the DPI split in 2002, the breakaway faction dubbed itself the Paraiyar *Viduthalai* (Liberation) Peravai. Several interviewees asserted that the Pallars discriminated against lower caste Dalits in areas where they held land and power, they emphasised the mainly Paraiyar constituency of the DPI as a source of pride. Indeed, the orator of the Liberation Panthers, ‘firebrand’ Murugan referred to Thirumavalavan as a ‘Paraiyar Ambedkar’ or ‘Paraiyar leader’ on numerous occasions. It was often noted, as a cause for concern that the Chakkiliyar had not organised themselves in a similar manner. They were regarded as the least organised of the Dalit castes, the most oppressed and lowliest in caste terms.

Although organisations such as the TAYF, the TDLM and the DLM campaigned with them, none of these has yet emerged as a significant movement. This partly seems due to geographical factors and the fact that Chakkiliyars are often in a dependent minority. In an attempt to comprehend this absence of significant movement activity I travelled to villages in Karur, Dindugal and Erode. Despite the lack of organisations it was evident that attitudes were changing and that Dalits were resisting the imposition of caste based work. Several young men whom I interviewed in this area spoke of the DPI as the organisation whom they most emphasised with. It will be interesting to see whether the DPI can make inroads here, or whether the caste connotations will preclude solidarity of this nature.

III: DISTINCTIVE DEMONSTRATORS: ACTIVIST PERSPECTIVES

CONSCIOUS COLLECTIVE ACTORS

As I have shown, in many ways the approach that I followed was shaped by what I found in the field, and differs from the methodological perspective that I had outlined prior to my departure. It became apparent that the specificity of researching social movements requires the adoption of certain theoretical and methodological approaches that differ significantly from research into other fields. One obvious distinguishing feature of movement activists is the fact that they are already engaged in self-reflexive analysis of the society, in which they reside, and are seeking ways to change it through action. Such consciousness is not uniform but extends along a spectrum from those who believe that they are hard done by, to movement leaders and theoreticians who have formulated an ideological critique of the system and considered possible solutions and alternatives. All the issues explored in this thesis, and many of the research questions that are raised, are problems that exercise the minds of the activists themselves and often form the basis of conversations. Unlike other socially conscious individuals, social movement members act as part of a group who share similar worldviews and aspirations. Often this has led researchers to analyse the movement as a unitary actor in its own right. The leader-centred nature of movements in India renders such a position attractive. The Liberation Panthers, however, had no formal mechanisms to delineate who was and was not a 'member' of the movement. As a result the people attending any given meeting could encompass a wide variety of levels of commitment. Whilst those engaged in movement activity on a permanent basis may display a firm grasp and understanding of the movement, its

ideology, and the social deprivation that they hope to eradicate, the more peripheral members tend to be less conscious of such issues. Social Movements, as Diani notes, are not “empirical entities with clear-cut boundaries: what is and is not part of a movement is as much a matter of subjective perception as of objective criteria” (1992: 107).

Participation in movement activity is often an intermittent or transitory affair with people becoming involved in the protests over one particular issue or incident and then drifting away again. Local issues would bring people out to demonstrations, but the number of core activists who turned up to most meetings was minimal. A consequence of this wavering commitment is a certain ambiguity in defining a social movement. Does the definition incorporate those on the peripheries of movement action, or only the activists who are aware of and committed to the ideology and principles of the movement in question?³⁴ This question is further complicated by the fact that people join a movement for differing reasons of their own. Individuals may be attracted to join a movement because of its leader, due to the companionship it offers, due to the ideology it espouses, or the action repertoire it adopts. Alternatively they may join in out of moral conviction, from a personal history of suffering, due to a family history of activism or simply for the thrill of seeing themselves in the papers, and of being part of an historical movement for change. In order to analyse such diverse interests as part of a common programme we need some means of identifying a movement. How one defines a movement has significant implications for the research questions that are asked, and the methods that are chosen to answer those questions.

³⁴ I have chosen to use the term ‘social movement’ here, to distinguish the mobilisation of Dalits today from caste organisations, political parties or interest groups. Although based upon a caste category those movements organising themselves upon the basis of the Dalit community are transcending individual caste boundaries. Further, even where the movements appeal to a caste constituency they envision a more equal society for all, and are not simply concerned with their own uplift. According to some authors, social movements are networks of interaction and cannot be described as organisations at all. “All too often”, according to Oliver, “we speak of movement strategy, tactics, leadership, membership, recruitment, division of labour, success and failure – terms which apply only to coherent decision making entities (that is organisations or groups) not to crowds, collectivities, or whole social movements” (1989: 4). I am sympathetic to the argument that a social movement is constituted by social networks of people and groups who cannot be presented as a unitary entity. I maintain, however, that the conscious acts of the movement members who choose to unite around certain goals and objectives is best reflected in referring to them as a social movement. The term, like the notion of ‘collective identity’, is a useful tool for analysis rather than a reality in itself.

CASTE IDENTITIES AND MOVEMENTS

In this study, whilst most sympathetic to the nuances and implications of the New Social Movement perspective, I have tried to study collective action within its social, historical, and political context so as to better understand the motivations of the actors.³⁵ “Without an understanding of identity, of the ‘passion of the actors’”, as Foweraker insists, “... there is no way of explaining *why* SMs move” (Foweraker 1995:12). This is especially the case with regard to Dalit movements. The participants in Tamilnadu were poor, had insecure jobs or housing, and were often subject to the threat of force. Ignoring the motives of the actors would have rendered much of the DPI’s work inexplicable. It is naïve, however, to assume that the meaning of collective action will be the sum of its individual components. Were the diversity of Dalit voices represented in any organisation then it would be incapable of coherent action. A NSM perspective differentiates between collective action that occurs within a social movement context, and that which does not. The key to this distinction is the question of collective identity. Identity is concerned with the self-esteem and image of a community in relation to others. It relates to questions of ‘who ‘we’ are’, and ‘what position ‘we’ have in society with regard to other communities’. Dalits have long been denied a voice, and have been labelled variously as Untouchables, Outcastes, Harijans, Backward Classes and Scheduled Castes.³⁶ Dalit movements have variously been defined as caste, class, religious, or people’s movements. Emphasising the participants’ own perceptions of Dalit mobilisation ensures that we do not neglect the agency and consciousness of the actors themselves.

The extensive affirmative action programmes for the Scheduled Castes have obviously had a profound influence on the emergence and practice of Dalit movements. To over-emphasise the institutional influences on, or determinants of, movement organisation, however, is to pay insufficient attention to the radicalism and creativity of Dalit movement actors, because “a social category is *not* a behavioural entity” (Foss & Larkin 1986: 131). Rather, such categories have to be created,

³⁵ I should stress here that many of the movements under study did not conform to New Social Movement characteristics. I have not sought, in such instances to alter the data to fit the theory. The insights of Social Movement theory, rather, have been used to raise issues and questions relating to political mobilisation of this nature.

³⁶ This has meant that the “use of their own idiomatic form of speech reproduces their inferior status”. The term ‘Dalit’, separates the Dalits from the rest of society just as “the terms ‘worker’ and ‘working

recreated and lived if they are to be meaningful. The *Caste Association*, as Rudolph and Rudolph observed, assumed the characteristics of a voluntary organisation. “Membership in caste associations is *not* purely ascriptive, this is a necessary but not sufficient condition. One must also ‘join’ through some conscious act involving varying degrees of identification” (1967: 33). Without an approach that takes cognisance of this process of movement formation, key aspects of Dalit movements, evinced in their adoption of the term ‘Dalit’ would be downplayed.³⁷ This point is especially pertinent here, where caste blocks *are* often taken for granted and perceived to act as a coherent unit – as in widespread calculations about ‘vote-banks’.

IV: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: ACTORS, IDENTITIES & ANALYSIS

NSMs AND OLD SOCIAL CATEGORIES

So as not to conceive of caste ties and structures as necessarily ‘pre-given’ or even pre-eminent, we require alternative approaches to questions of identity formation and assertion, organisation, and mobilisation undertaken in the name of that category. In this thesis the explanatory potential and methodological implications of a New Social Movement (NSM) framework have been used to raise searching questions about the processes and practices observed. A social movement can be described as people united in a common belief or issue, who operate democratic organisations (in a loose sense of the term) of their own in posing an extra-institutional challenge to the prevailing order (Foweraker 1995: 12, Foss & Larkin 1986: 2, Oommen 1990: 30). Although a recurrent question in this thesis is whether the DPI is a *Dalit* or a *caste* movement, I have chosen to speak here in terms of a social movement rather than *caste-based collective* for several reasons. Firstly such a classification serves to emphasise the radical objectives of the movements which aim to *eradicate* caste, rather than simply better their own position in the social hierarchy. Secondly, the DPI consists of members from different castes. Even were we to dub the DPI a caste based organisation on the basis that it has a mainly Paraiyar constituency, it is only a small proportion of that group that has joined the movement. Many seek alternative means to improve their lot, many are not prepared to engage in risk-related actions, and some

class’ [for example] ... denote both *intrinsic limitations and destiny*” (Rowbotham cited in Foss & Larkin 1986: 84).

³⁷ A processual approach to collective identity, as Melucci stresses, “implies a ‘constructivist’ view of collective action ... [and means that]... *the empirical unity of a social movement should be considered as a result* rather than a starting point” (Melucci 1995: 42-3).

members of the social category express disapproval of the collective actors. Movements such as the Liberation Panthers, therefore, depend upon members *choosing* to participate, even if most of those who become involved belong to a particular caste. Thirdly, whilst the DPI did not conform to a western definition of a 'New Social Movement', the epithet 'new' serves to highlight the contemporary nature of this manifestation of caste.³⁸

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Social movement actors are neither homogeneous nor necessarily united. The social category of the Scheduled Castes is cross cut by divisions on the basis of religion, caste, region, class position, gender, age and language. Research into Dalit movements, therefore, has to tease out the contesting aspects of signification evinced in the many movements that work with and for the Dalits. The areas of interest to emerge from this relate to the processes of conscientisation and identity formation, relations between movement organisers and the participants, and how deep the ideologies and discourses of the movement as a whole have penetrated to its individual members. In other words: how do the action concepts of the SM translate into the everyday lives of the actors involved? Movement rhetoric and ideology remains abstract and empty until and unless it is translated into the lives and experiences of its members. Rather than decide *a priori* that members of a group must subscribe to the views propounded by its leaders, I adopted a methodological assumption of ignorance in order to assess the meanings and relevance of movement principles and involvement for the agents themselves. This was especially useful in the aftermath of the DPI decision to contest the elections. Speaking to members who were unaware of, or unconvinced by, the change in policy I was able to tap into the contradictions between leaders and participants.

RAPPORT AND RECIPROCITY

Any focus upon individual participants and life histories within a movement that is far from homogeneous raises important methodological issues. Certainly, it is necessary to establish a relationship of trust and reciprocity with people before they are willing

³⁸ Part of the problem with much NSM theory is that it has been developed within the specific context of Western Europe. The analytical insights of the theory have been applied elsewhere, however, and it is these that I draw upon.

to answer questions openly (Patwardhan 1979: 153). Such difficulties are compounded when talking to movement leaders or committed activists. They were all too ready to talk and express their views, but they often follow an established pattern of movement stories. This problematic lies at the heart of any fieldwork experience, but it is further complicated in this instance by the collective nature of the phenomena observed. Whilst all individuals develop stock responses to common questions, the regurgitation of movement narratives by activists serves to obscure the differences of opinion that fissure any collective actor. One means of overcoming this problem is to engage with the respondents on a day to day basis, both to win their trust and in order to ask searching questions that disrupt the pre-rehearsed narratives. Counter-intuitively, however, I also attempted to follow researchers into this field who have shown a preference for group based, collective interviews (Omvedt 1979, Touraine 1981, Melucci 1992). The significance of this emphasis is that it reasserts the *social* component of movement activity that might be obscured by perspectives that take the individual as the primary unit of analysis.

Several interviews that I conducted culminated in a group discussing the matter amongst themselves, and debating what should happen next. In this process they were forced to move beyond the formulaic responses that they could have fallen back upon as individuals. In Vadianpatti for example, I interviewed the local members of the DPI in the 'hall' of the movement (20/03/99). Despite the impressive nature of this construction and the ubiquity of movement symbols and photos of the leader, the villagers insisted that the DPI had not done enough to help them. Kamaraj, who is from a neighbouring village, accompanied me on this visit. He rejected their claims and asked what more the movement could be expected to do. For ten minutes or so he argued and discussed their situation whilst I remained an interested spectator. Ultimately it was agreed that a delegation from the village would meet local leaders of the movement to air their grievances.³⁹ Another example of such action-oriented discussion came during my interview with Pandiammal, a Women's Wing leader in Madurai (28/03/99). Several local women sat in on the interview and when I asked them about the problems that they faced they were unanimous in citing the discrimination they faced at the ration shop. They maintained that they were

³⁹ The Vadianpatti members remained sceptical that anything would be achieved, and I was unable to follow up what occurred in this instance.

constantly under-served and frequently made to queue for hours. Their complaints led to a consideration of how this could be overcome, and it was agreed that a poster would be printed to protest against this discrimination. This poster was later printed, but it is unlikely that it had any effect on its own.

Guided discussions, or collective interviews, should facilitate and stimulate the flow of discussion rather than following a fixed sequence or set phraseology. Such interviews, as we have seen, often assume an internal dynamic of their own. I feel that this process should be encouraged rather than negated. “That the ‘collective interview’ should fade into the ‘organising meeting’”, as Omvedt holds, ‘is not inappropriate’. “An ‘organising meeting’ is after all a fully developed form of this: the ‘respondents’ are presented with new values, new aims which are explained and elaborated as fully as possible and then asked not simply to express feelings during the meeting ... but to act after that” (Omvedt 1979: 384). Through group discussions, thus, I have attempted to chart the diversity of movement voices, analyses of action, and sentiments, to assess how far members are attuned to the concerns of the movement as a whole, and what motivates their participation, without isolating them from the field of action.

V: GROUP WORK: STUDYING COLLECTIVE ACTORS

GROUP DYNAMICS

In the event most of the interviews I conducted ended up by being group discussions. Even when I made appointments to see individuals, it was very rare that I would find them alone. The problems with this are obvious. Movement leaders being interviewed in front of their followers may be tempted to reiterate the movement position and avoid talking about themselves personally (cf. Della Porta 1992: 182). The interview could become a staged performance in which all questions would be answered and the interviewer convinced. Where I met people in their houses, there were often activists waiting to see them and so these conditions often arose. The advantages of group interviews became more evident in this situation, particularly where I was introduced by acquaintances. Almost always they would join in the interview themselves. Since these acquaintances were always informed and engaged, I was happy to encourage this process. The answers elicited from such exchanges were more full and frank than those proffered to me, or to an uncritical audience of movement participants, since

both sides could speak from experience and ask pertinent and probing questions. Such meetings also offered me the chance to observe how power negotiations and questions are tackled within movement organisations. In Vadianpatti, as we saw, I was told that the Liberation Panthers existed only in name. Had I been there on my own or with an interpreter the assertion would have rested unanswered, though I might have later put it to a movement activist. As it was I was accompanied by a DPI activist who refuted the suggestion, entered into a lively debate, and then arranged a meeting. Although I had not planned it as such, I was able to witness the group dynamics that arise in organisational settings in a way that would have been impossible otherwise.

A considerable amount of the research was conducted through informal conversations during which I not only listened to the opinions of my 'informants', but also expressed my own thoughts. Conversations would range over innumerable subjects not necessarily relevant to the aims of this research. The exchange of views, however, resulted in an atmosphere where we could talk openly about subjects. I would frequently voice my ideas and theories about Dalit Movements to movement activists. As Templeman (1996: 9) found in his study of the Nadar caste, such engagement often led to instructive critiques of putative analysis. In a politically charged atmosphere where there were massacres at movement rallies, mass preventative arrests of activists, and several incidents of higher caste violence it would not have been surprising had few people been willing to speak.⁴⁰ If one displays understanding and commitment over time, however, then people are more willing to answer difficult questions. Getting involved with activists may have influenced my perspective, but it also gave me far greater access to the networks of affiliation that constitute a movement.⁴¹ For example, when I asked the leader of the Dalit Liberation Movement how he could possibly support the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam - Bharatiya Janata Party combine in one constituency, but back the TMC elsewhere, he initially refused

⁴⁰ For much of my fieldwork the political environment was highly charged. There were massacres and riots, villages were ransacked, people were murdered, and communities subjected to debilitating social boycott. This not only made it impossible to go to every sphere of movement activity it also enforced an exaggerated sense of solidarity upon the groups whom I was studying. In times of peaceful but persistent protest it is probable that a greater number of dissenting voices would have made themselves heard. Also, in turbulent times, the ideological objectives of a movement are often muted by the need to respond to the actions of others. Studying such movements at a time of political conflict, furthermore, rendered contact with opposition groups extremely difficult.

⁴¹ "As long as I remained uninvolved", Bellwinkel noted in a similar situation, "I did not get the information I wanted, being condemned to the surface of events. This changed completely when I became personally involved" (1979: 150).

to answer. When I put it to him that I was being called upon to justify this by others, however, he was more willing to explain the reasoning behind his actions. Also, only after I had got to know activists was I able to visit villages and the more remote outposts of the movements.

VI: OBSERVING MOVEMENT ACTION

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The fact that Dalit movements are embedded in, and emerge out of, a specific political culture should caution one against too easy an acceptance of movement claims. The rhetorical commitment to the rights of women, for example, rarely translated into the everyday lives of the individual members. In the attempt to analyse the veracity of a movement's assertions, the use of participant observation assumed great significance. 'Hanging out' with activists informally in their home environments allowed me to assess the influence of the movement in people's daily lives, but I also attended DPI meetings in order to observe the movement 'in action'. To make my presence less strange or alien, I only attended such meetings where I knew some of the activists who were going. As such I was recognised and acknowledged rather than treated with mistrust and suspicion. It is clear that protest meetings in themselves are valuable sources of information and interaction. Members often frame their opinions by listening to the speeches of the leaders. Participant observation enabled me to note the relational patterns between participants - followers and leaders, men and women, and between peripheral members and activists – rather than privileging the speeches of the leaders. Participant observation renders movements and meetings a novelty that may be absent from the perspectives of those accustomed to its mode of operation. Issues of class, sub-caste and gender within the leadership or group structure, and questions relating to the levels of democratic participation in meetings and policy decisions may be observed by the researcher, whereas the members may wish to play down their significance. Such observation was crucial to an understanding of the hierarchical structures of the DPI, and the way in which the movement recruits new members.

Allied to this, is the fact that for SMs "protest is their most important medium and decisive for their existence, identity and outcome. ... The study of SM protest can tell us a lot about features such as the concerns of the people protesting, their capacities for mobilisation, their forms of action, the social characteristics of activists, the spatial

and temporal distribution of protest, etc” (Rucht and Ohlemacher 1992: 77). As we have seen, it was only by tracing the movements of DPI participants that I was able to arrive at an understanding of the spread and scope of the movement. I follow Melucci, therefore, in stating that collective “action itself (not structure or opinions) should be a meaningful subject for research” on social movements (Melucci 1992: 247). The meetings are vital to the construction of a ‘we-feeling’, a sense of being part of a wider movement, and the activists will talk for weeks about a particularly brilliant speech or turn out. These speeches and rallies can be viewed as a means of ‘persuasive communication’, that serve to convince people that the movement is appropriate and necessary.

Hunt (1984) argues that “producing revolutionary talk is as much a part of the revolution as the barricades ... For without new vocabularies and rhetoric, new fields of interpretation, new symbols and signs, the revolutionary interpretations would not have been as easily made” (in Johnston & Klandermans 1995: 13). The ‘strong cultural’ implications of this assertion are flawed in the Indian context where movement rhetoric often echoes existing legislation, but it is certainly true that symbols and speeches help to constitute a movement and define its aspirations. To reflect the significance that movement members accord these speeches, I recorded over 40 such orations, mostly during meetings themselves. Collective identity is constantly constructed and negotiated through ritual means of interaction, and an organisation mostly “maintains its identity and continuity through its symbolic representations” (Kertzer: 1988: 18). As noted earlier (see also: Chapter V), symbols and emblems attain great importance in the establishment of a movement. The DPI marks its presence in an area by raising its flag or erecting a painted board. Subsequent to joining an organisation in this manner the induction of a village/neighbourhood into the DPI would be sealed by a ceremony involving movement leaders. The high-point of most movement meetings is the speech of the leader. In this peroration the leader outlines the aims and objectives of the movement, and comes to symbolise the movement in his/her person and to articulate the grievances of the activists. By analysing the content of these speeches it is possible to ascertain what issues are deemed to be important, and how these differ from views on the ground. Such observations are difficult to find out in interviews.

VII: RESEARCHING THE RESEARCHER

THE 'WE' AND THE 'I'

The problems and methodology outlined above relate to issues of researching Social Movements, and of Dalit movements in particular. There were also issues that are more specific to my own relation to the field.⁴² My relationship with the interviewees was crucial to the sort of narrative that was produced. Often I was the subject of questioning myself. I encouraged such exchanges and felt that they improved the quality of the subsequent interview. People were happier speaking to me when they knew who I was and where I was coming from. My age and my status as a single man also acted to offset the traditional imbalance of power between the researcher and the researched. I was addressed as *Thambi* (Younger Brother), and frequently asked if I would be prepared to marry a Dalit girl. Such initial exchanges helped to establish rapport. The interviews were also conducted in Tamil so that I did not need to work through an interpreter, and could clarify issues on the spot. This fact was essential to the interviews that I was able to conduct in the remoter villages.

The nature of the groups being interviewed meant that it was necessary to gain access through the mediation of activists, or 'gate-keepers'. This initially took the form of a snowball sample, as the people I got to know introduced me to others, and so on. The self-selecting nature of these studies as we have seen has obviously given my work somewhat of a movement perspective, but I have tried to correct this bias both by interviewing members from several areas and movements, and by interviewing non-movement Dalits. Many of the people who acted as 'gate-keepers' in my case had known my family, from the seven years we spent in the country between 1979-1986. My father worked in the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, and I met many of my informants through Church contacts. This had the advantage of explaining my interest in the subject and rendering me less strange to people, but it may have influenced the type of people I got to meet, and the sort of answers that I received. I have tried to overcome this through extensive interviews in rural and urban areas, and with

⁴² In a broad sense I recognise that researchers always modify the field of action, and may even manipulate it beyond their intention. By merely attending rallies of the Liberation Panthers, I could be presented as evidence that these issues were of interest to a world audience. The most visible differences, however, were subtler than this. The jostling to get into the photo, the increased

in this study of a Backward Caste perspective is conspicuous, and I can only highlight the need to conduct research amongst the increasingly prominent BC movements. My close association with movement members, however, gave me better insight into the DPI and allowed me to gain access to more people in a meaningful sense than would have been possible had I insisted on interviewing their opponents as well.⁴³

VIII: BEYOND THE RHETORIC: NUANCED ACCOUNTS OF ACTION CONCLUSION

The methodology adopted enabled me to analyse the movement in all its various guises and forms. This diversity of contact was especially important because, Social Movement activists are very conscious of the power of the written word and follow all the media coverage of their organisation. They were very keen, therefore, to ensure that I received a positive impression of the movement in question. As we shall see, this often led activists to play down the shortcomings or violence of a movement on tape. Rather, they focused on the ‘successes’ of the movement, of protests that achieved their objectives, well attended rallies and the sense of security which they derived from participation. The distortion that this can lead to was most obvious in the comments of a union facilitator. Whilst we were waiting for a bus, chatting informally, he insisted on the need for violence to secure the liberation of the Dalit people. After some time, however, he said; “I am not talking like a responsible movement leader now! We should meet at another point when you can interview me” (20/04/99).

willingness to shout slogans with raised fists, or the determination to speak into the microphone when I had a camera all registered my effect on the field of action.

⁴³ Interestingly, my involvement with members of the movements under study brought me close to putting certain aspects of Touraine’s (1981) method of Sociological Intervention into practice. Alighting at the bus stop in Kodankipatti, Palani Kumar insisted that we should use the opportunity of my presence to interview the caste Hindu *panchayat* president. Murugan is described as the prime motivator in the continuing oppression of the Dalits in the village and would rarely if ever meet face to face with them in a context where they could question him about his perception of village affairs. By presenting me as a Human Rights reporter, however, four of us gained an audience with him. The interview and similar ones in Lingyapatti and Sivarakottai were instructive on many counts. It emphasised the polarity in viewpoints between the dominant caste figure, and the movement activists who oppose him. The questions posed by the members of the Liberation Panthers highlighted the issues that they felt to be significant, and were pitched at a level of cultural subtlety that I would have been incapable of. When we were categorically assured that there was no untouchability in the area, for example, Palani Kumar raised questions about the village festivals that ultimately revealed the continuing exclusion of the Dalit community.

By studying Dalit protest in terms of the material conditions from which it arises, the identities and ideologies that are constructed, and the subjective experiences of participants, I hope to have acquired a better picture of the concerns of the DPI and, by extension, other Dalit movements in the state. Through a process of triangulation that analyses the literature and voices of the agents, and by observing movement action and interaction through the eyes of the uninitiated I have tried to avoid privileging either the official or the dissenting versions of the Dalit protest. What Rajni Kothari terms 'grassroots thinking' "is an effort to redefine the scope and range of politics and to open up new spaces for the articulation of protest. It is here, at the convergence of social activists and the poor but conscious and restless people, that a new arena for 'counter-action' or 'counter-cultural movements' is emerging and challenging existing hegemonies of thought" (in Mageli 1997:24). It is this process of social criticism and creation that I have attempted to chart. In doing so I hope to have provided an understanding of the Dalit movements, the conditions of their emergence, their real grievances and demands, the difficulties they face, and the world they wish to see. Before beginning my analysis of contemporary Dalit movements it is necessary to first have an understanding of the historical context. Chapter Two, therefore, will provide a brief survey of the socio-political backdrop to Social Movement action in Tamilnadu.

CHAPTER TWO: DEMOCRACY, DEMONSTRATIONS & DISORDER

Social Mobilisation and Socio-Political Change in India

"The political and industrial revolutions were (earlier in the city and later in the village) transforming old institutions, uprooting the old society, changing old habits and modes of thinking, and imposing new techniques ... such breaks with the past could not fail to leave their mark on the form and content of the crowd's activities"

[G. Rudé: 1995: 5].

I: DEMOCRACY AND DISORDER

INTRODUCTION

At the stroke of midnight on August the 15th 1947 India became an Independent Republic. The Constitution of the nascent state, agreed in 1950, proclaimed India to be a democratic country with socialist tendencies. The commitment to affirmative action programmes, health and schooling for all, and a programme of national industrialisation heralded the dawn of a new era. The mass movement of the people, which had rendered the victory of the nationalist cause inevitable, similarly demanded the adoption of more open and inclusive modes of government and social interaction. The inclusive emphasis of the new state was reinforced, not only by the directive principles and legislative changes of the Constitution itself, but by the selection of Dr. Ambedkar as the chairman of the drafting committee. The new state promised a nation of equal citizens, where none need fear discrimination on account of who they were, and instituted the legislative measures to ensure such an end. The participatory emphasis of the state suggested that people's demands would be heard without their recourse to extra-institutional protest. If Dalits are oppressed, if women are molested, or if Muslims are discriminated against on the basis of religion, they have the legal entitlement to enlist the state apparatus as an ally in their quest for justice. Fifty years after Independence, however, extra-institutional protest has increased, much of it directed against the state, to the point where several commentators have argued that India suffers from a 'crisis of governability' (Kohli 1990: ix).¹ In retrospect it was never going to be easy to erase centuries of social inequality by legal means, and the introduction of the franchise offered more tangible avenues to power than had been

¹ Although they do not use the same phrasology, Saberwal 1986, Adas 1991, and Mitra 1992 also raise questions about the political stability of India. This chapter deals with only the political issues that are said to have contributed to India's 'crisis of governability', thus reflecting Kohli's assertion that the factors behind this crisis are "more political than socio-economic" (1990: ix).

available before. Forms of protest found to be effective in the nationalist struggle also established a whole array of methods and examples to draw upon. In what follows I will chart the interplay between democracy and demonstrations in India, assessing the reasons for the increase in political mobilisation and for the continuing stability of the state despite this.

India's transition, from a conglomeration of segmented kingdoms to a centralised democratic political order ideologically committed to egalitarianism, raises significant questions about the organisational forms and implications of political protest.² This chapter will focus on the proliferation of extra-institutional mobilisation that accompanied this socio-political transformation. I shall consider the forms in which protest has been, and is, manifested; how collective action relates to political institutions; and whether mobilisation of this nature is a challenge to the legitimacy of the state or a possible path to political participation. In the scholarly literature on this subject, a majority view draws attention to a correlation between the rise of democratic institutions, and the increase in social mobilisation and conflict. "As democracy is introduced and competing elites undertake political mobilisation", Kohli asserts, "old identities are rekindled and reforged. Modern technology hastens the process ... and the collision of mobilised identities with each other or with the state ought not to be totally surprising" (Kohli: 1998: 9, cf. Rudolphs 1967, Gould 1988). This outcome is presented as an ineluctable result of the "profoundly subversive power of the democratic discourse, which ... allows the spread of equality and liberty into increasingly wider domains, and therefore acts as a fermenting agent upon the different forms of struggle against subordination" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 155). An unsettling conclusion that one can reach from such analysis "is that India's democracy has itself contributed to the over-politicisation of the Indian polity" (Kohli 1990: 20). The problem of such an approach is that it explains both too much and too little. As Mitra (1999) observes, the notion of over-politicisation appears to take minimal liberal democracy as the norm and any deviation from this is presented as excess. Alternatively, events that are particular to a specific country and time, are presented as merely a part of the "great democratic revolution" - a continuation of "the most uniform, the most ancient, and the most permanent tendency that is found in history"

² 'Segmented' in this context refers, in Price's terms to "relatively decentralised systems of social and political organisation in which authority is dispersed into discrete domains" (1996: 14).

(De Tocqueville 1994(1835): 3). Assimilating any given mobilisation into a hegemonic narrative makes it easy, as Spivak notes, “for the historian to abdicate the responsibility he (sic.) has of exploring and describing the consciousness specific to the rebellion and be content to ascribe it to a transcendental consciousness” (1998: 11).³ It is insufficient as an explanation, in this light, because it cannot explain *why* certain groups or individuals mobilise whereas others do not, why certain mobilisations result in violence whilst others are assimilated into the mainstream, and how the language and institutions of democracy filter down to the grass-roots level. In short, it is in danger of obscuring the specificity of the movements themselves, as well as a sense of change over time.

II: COLONISATION & CONFLICT: INDIAN SOCIETY & BRITISH RULE

INDIAN HISTORY: PASSIVITY AND PROTEST

Historical analyses of India frequently highlight an opposition, that is presumed to exist, between the karmic passivity of the ‘traditional’ inhabitants – who are portrayed as living in social harmony due to the ‘perfect integration’ of the caste and village systems - and the political mobilisation that has caused increasing levels of instability in India today.⁴ The images of people starving to death outside granaries during the Bengal famine (Thompson 1991: 349, Mitra 1992: 176), and of Dalits accepting their subordination (Moffatt 1979, Racine 1998) serve to highlight this opposition. According to this construction, the current discontent is perhaps due to “a lack of fit between the principles which have gone into the designing of these institutions over many long centuries in Europe, and those informal institutions to which we in India have traditionally been heir: family, caste, village” (Saberwal 1986: 2). The

³ Foucault argues that power is “never localised” and that individuals “are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising power” (1980: 98). Rather than read people’s actions as the consequences of ‘higher’ discourses and power relations, therefore, he calls for “an *ascending* analysis of power starting ... from its infinitesimal mechanisms” (1980:99)

⁴ Bonner’s (1990: 1-2) is perhaps the most simplistic articulation of this point of view. He sees contemporary social movements as enabling ‘the poor’ to escape their belief in *karma*. Adas (1991: 296) observes that revisionist historians have correctly challenged the image of the passive peasantry but warns against the creation of a counter-‘myth’. The impact of everyday resistance, as he notes, should not be overstated. Kohli (1990: 3-4) insists that “India was never easy to govern”, but Mitra notes that in democratic India “collective conflict also indicates the growing assertiveness on the part of previously powerless groups” (1992: 141). Where ‘tradition’ ends and ‘modernity’ begins, however, is not so clear cut. For our purposes an arbitrary break in the modes of protest can be posited to exist between the Indian mutiny of 1857, and the rise of the India National Congress in 1885. Where the mutiny was a spontaneous uprising in defence of religious values, the INC was a deliberate attempt to wrest power from the British.

consequence of this disjunction, Inden argues, “is a nation-state that remains ontologically and politically inaccessible to its own citizens” (1990: 197). The current ‘crisis’ of legitimacy in India may then partly be due to the fact that the socio-political institutions of the ‘developed’ world were precipitously introduced to the ‘third world’ before it was “ready”. Such terminology, Casteñeda insists, “is of delicate usage: it signifies simply that natural, historical processes are being ‘rushed’ by the extension of the products of modernity to societies that have not generated them” (1993: 337, cf. Khilnani 1998).

An alternative view, proffered by Weiner, “is that violence among caste, linguistic, and religious groups is endemic in India’s variegated social structure, and that there is no reason to believe that the situation is worse now than in the past” (1997: 241). The work of James Scott (1985), and the ‘Subalternists’ has gone a long way towards challenging the historical image of a fatalistic or passive peasantry. The absence of overt conflict did not mean that people accepted the prevailing order, or that they were not engaged in ‘everyday acts of resistance’ that enabled them to ameliorate their condition. Adas (1991) and Prakash (1990) note the historical significance of ‘avoidance’ protest, such as the flight of peasants, withdrawal into religious sectarianism like the *Bhakti* cults, or the shift from one patron to another. Increasing centralisation under colonial rule enabled landlords to demand the return of labourers who had fled to neighbouring states, but it also rendered migration or emigration easier, and allowed many labourers to escape from exploitative labour relations. Better communications and transport systems also enabled horizontal mobilisation on a larger scale, however, thereby facilitating more confrontational modes of protest.

FROM (INTER) DEPENDENCE TO INDIVIDUALISM

The opposition drawn between passive peasants and contentious citizens may be somewhat overstated, but the significance of social and economic change to the behaviour of ‘crowds’ cannot be denied. In his seminal work, ‘The Crowd in History’ (1995 (1964)), George Rudé charts the transformations in politics, society and the economy that were wrought by the political and industrial revolutions of the Eighteenth century in England and France. “Such breaks with the past”, he observes, “could not fail to leave their mark on the form and content of the crowd’s activities” (1995: 5). It would be puzzling had the introduction of British rule, and the social,

economic, and political transformations that attended it, not had a comparable influence on protest in India. Prior to the Raj, India had experienced centralising drives by ambitious military monarchs, yet it remained (particularly in the south) compartmentalised into the territorial frameworks of 'little kingdoms' (Dumont 1997). As Saberwal argues, "confining persons into their segmental spaces may indeed be taken as the principal, if unintended, theme of the caste order" (1997: 125). In other words, the inhabitants of 'traditional' India were not able to conceptualise collective protest on a large scale (Kaviraj 1997: 147). Only recently has the endogamous community extended far beyond the boundaries of the village in South India, and caste and kinship could be equated with locality (Rudolphs 1967, Mines 1994).⁵ Drawing upon his fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, Mines insists that the paradigm of society was that "of *constituencies*, which form around dominant individuals and their patronage" (1994: 112). Towards the end of the 19th, and the beginning of the 20th centuries, the British were forced to confront and interact with these prominent individuals (Washbrook 1976: 109). So long as these 'big men' remained the focus of social interaction, the strength of vertical ties of obligation and patronage militated against the possibility of group action on the basis of horizontal solidarity. If a magnate considered it to be personally advantageous, Washbrook (1976) notes, he could dictate social and political alliances for his followers, which they would usually regard as ritually polluting or economically counter-productive. Positions of great economic power and status were maintained through patron-client ties and the use of force (ibid. 151). Resisting the compulsions of economically dominant patrons was barely conceivable, because agricultural production was dictated by adherence to caste practices and roles. Each person was assigned their place in the system, and resistance to the landlords resulted in social ostracism or violence. "Before the development of a substantial non-agrarian economy", therefore, "it was impossible to break free of its economic logic" (N.K.Bose, in Kaviraj 1997: 6).

CENTRALISATION AND CASTE CHANGE

When Colonial rule laid the basis for a centralised, commercial economy it assimilated the traditional compartments into a larger whole, thus enabling each

⁵ The practice of exogamy was prevalent in the North, but it tended to be on a local scale and occur between villages rather than across the state as a whole.

dispersed caste to unite across a much wider territorial area.⁶ In the face of this process of social transformation, the pre-eminence of the caste headman soon disappeared. Despite the retention of private armies, the authority of the headman largely rested upon consensus, “whose area of influence was limited to the locale. That consensus was abruptly withdrawn when western style education expanded possibilities of occupational and physical mobility” (Mines 1994:112). The communities bound by marriage, kinship and locality were gradually replaced by statewide caste associations bound by political affiliation as much as blood ties. To view this change as a purely political shift would be mistaken. This extension of the basis of caste organisation, according to Barnett, “revolves around the meanings assigned by South Indians to the symbol of blood *purity*. A stress on blood as embodying a caste-wide code for conduct replaces caste hierarchy; a stress on blood as embodying natural substance opens the ideological field to other identity choices” (1977: 396-7). This process of transition from a hierarchy of interdependent social categories to a universe of ‘essentially identical’ competing blocs is what Dumont terms the ‘substantialisation’ of caste (1980: 222). The traditional subdivision of caste into innumerable sub-castes is said to disappear with the formation of statewide caste associations and the extension of marriage boundaries so that castes now appear as collective individuals (ibid.).

It is arguable that Dumont’s primary emphasis on hierarchy and interdependence results in his downplaying the fluidity of the pre-colonial caste system. Competition and substantialisation were ‘traditional’ elements of the system (Dumont 1980: 417).⁷ It is clear, however, that the processes of social change set in train by the British offered the lower castes greater scope for mobility. The proliferation of caste associations in the late 19th century must, therefore, be examined in the light of social, economic, and political alterations in structure that enabled individuals to exercise more choice in their lives. The significance of emergent, alternative avenues to power was apparent to Alexis De Tocqueville. “As soon as land began to be held on any

⁶ This process has been documented by several authors. See the accounts given by the Rudolphs 1967, Dirks 1987, Gould 1988, Washbrook 1989, Adas 1991, Dumont 1997, and Smith 2000 for more detail.

⁷ Rao (1987: 5) observes that the “traditional caste system was relatively open and upward mobility occurred in two ways”: Firstly through military prowess and secondly through new religious sects. The Rudolphs (1967: 29), and Washbrook (1989:237) make similar points. Srinivas (1991: 315), however, argues that social mobility in pre-modern India was individualistic: “The need as well as the facilities for ‘corporate mobility’ did not exist”.

other than a feudal tenure, and personal property could in its turn confer influence and power”, he insisted, “every discovery in the arts, every improvement in commerce of manufactures, created so many new elements of equality among men” (1994: 5). Whilst the argument is over- simplified and must be adapted to specific times and locations, it is incontrovertible that new possibilities for achieving wealth, prestige, land and employment were required before the subgroup local endogamy that typified caste organisation could be restructured (Mines 1994).

In pre-colonial South India land rights were granted by and drew their legitimacy from a king (Dirks 1987, Ludden 1989). The British, however, held a very different view of property rights (Dirks 1987, Smith 2000). “By projecting an entirely different worldview”, as Ramashray Roy observes, “British rule not only made the creation of new opportunities of physical and social mobility possible but also changed, even if gradually, the consciousness of the socio-economically deprived by making them aware that there was nothing immutable about the system” (1990: 41). Even before the introduction of democratic modes of government, therefore, social processes were in train without which the mobilisation of communities as political actors would have been impossible. Similar processes of change were underway in the economic sphere. Commercialisation meant not just the increase in the use of money in the economy, but also “the use of objective monetary values to express social relationships” (Bayly 1988: 11). The decline in payment in kind, and the universal validity of cash based salaries gradually opened up the possibility of occupational mobility even to those who had hitherto been dependent upon the goodwill of a patron. The opportunity to change cannot, of course, explain the decision to do so (Constable 2000), but the importance of analysing processes of democratisation in terms of *social* as well as *political* practices should be apparent. New opportunities for employment (in the government, industry and service sector) and the importance of an education in English led to a physical transition of elites to the centre of government administration. Motivated by the new possibilities available to them, individuals and their families eschewed the local endogamous units in favour of families within the same caste, but with a similar outlook and education. These alliances dramatically altered the scope of social and political interaction from local castes to statewide caste communities (Mines 1994: 113, cf. Rudolphs 1967: 33, Gould 1988: 15). Such changes were not confined to the elite, and less privileged caste groups seized the

opportunity to escape from relations of dependency and bondage.⁸ The accelerated growth of urban areas reflects a desire for change and independence (Chowdhry 1998).

KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

This socio-economic transformation opened up new fields of identity choices to the inhabitants of Indian society. Alongside these structural alterations went advances in technology that facilitated the formation of group associations. Transport and communications infrastructure made other members of widely dispersed groups more accessible to each other, and brought them together. “The effect of a newspaper”, as De Tocqueville noted, “is not only to suggest the same purpose to a great number of persons, but to furnish the means for executing in common the designs which they may have singly conceived” (1994b: 111, cf. Anderson 1983 (1991), Tarrow 1998). The potential of such publications was immediately apparent to political aspirants in India. Educated Dalits, such as Ayothidas Pandithar in the early 20th century, “used his weekly (Oru Paisa) Tamizhan to spread his ideas and theories” (Rajadurai and Geetha 1993: 2092). The impetus that such media can afford to mobilising groups was even more apparent in the example of the non-Brahmin movement. The real beginning of the non-Brahmin party, according to Irshick, may be considered to be a meeting at which they “formed a joint stock company to publish non-Brahmin papers in Tamil, Telegu and English” (1969: 48). Railways, the press and the weakening of patron-client ties contributed to widening the scope of group action, but it was the political opportunity structure that influenced the course that this would take.⁹ Confronted by an alien society and systems of social stratification that they could not easily comprehend, the British administrators sought neat and comprehensible categories. The exercise of power creates knowledge, as Foucault (1980) observes, and the by-product of exercises such as the census and the communal Government Orders, was an unintended ‘production of the Indian people’.¹⁰

⁸ This form of ‘avoidance’ protest, however, mirrors that of individuals in the pre-British social system, before the rise of collective actors.

⁹ See also Anderson (1991) and Price (1996), for the way in which public discourse was shaped by the emergence of new court procedures and legal reports. These allowed the development of alternative notions of community, identity and mobilisation among 19th century South Indians.

¹⁰ Cohn (1990), Dirks (1989, 1992, 1997), Hansen (1999), Smith (2000) present similar arguments.

The census, in other words, was one of the new mechanisms of power and forms of control that were introduced by the colonial state. Whereas previous rulers had established centralised kingdoms, their power was never continuous nor widely dispersed (Baker 1976, Dirks 1987). Colonial power, by contrast, ceased to be concentrated in the person of the King and was systematically diffused. Through the imposition, and regular collection, of income tax, control of the productive processes in the country, and the gradual development of legal and political institutions, the government became increasingly prominent as a controller of people and resources (Baker 1976: 16, Dirks 1987: 357, Ludden 1989).¹¹ The increasing intrusion of the state into the lives of its citizens required not only new forms of knowledge about society, but also the exercise of new forms of control and the production of disciplined and receptive political subjects. "Political order was to be achieved not through the intermittent use of coercion but through continuous instruction, inspection and control" (Mitchell 1988: xi, cf. Foucault 1977, 1980). The significance of the census to this process was both the illusion it gave of 'knowing the people' (Cohn 1990), but also the modes of observation and classification which it introduced. The British view of Indian society influenced the information it collected, and was in turn affected by that information. The conception of caste as a distinct entity enabled caste-based enumeration and description. By asserting that each caste conformed to certain characteristics, and that everyone belonged to a caste, administrators avoided, and arguably precluded, the painstaking problems of differentiating between individuals by classifying them into groups (Smith 2000).¹² The desire for neat labels and categories, according to the 1921 Census Superintendent Mr Middleton, did not simply permit officials to understand their Indian subjects, it "led to the crystallisation of the caste system" (in Dirks 1996: 266). Each caste was defined, counted, and ranked in a manner that allowed for no anomalies or fluidity. Indeed, census officials refused to accept certain caste names, and they insisted upon establishing the "true" caste of each person (Cohn 1990: 244). This claim to certainty and truth is one of the primary features of the disciplinary world (Mitchell 1988: xi). Power works in a chain, however, rather than being a one-way process (Foucault 1980: 98). The British

¹¹ Mitchell's (1988) excellent book on Egypt provides a parallel account of the impact of colonialism in that country.

¹² There were other possible modes of categorisation and census taking, as Smith points out, such as the registration of births and deaths. "That, however, would have been to deal with the population as individuals, not as members of some social or territorial collectivity" (2000: 33).

attempt to impose order upon an alien social world led to increasing interaction with the Indian people, and this exchange profoundly affected the nature of the classificatory enterprise. In the process of mapping society, the colonial powers found that they had assumed the royal prerogative of deciding upon the hierarchical position of castes within their jurisdiction (Dirks 1987: 8, Cohn 1990: 158). Petitions demanding a change in caste rank, thus, were now submitted to the census commissioner rather than the sovereign, and the potential to renegotiate one's caste position led to a "livening up of the caste spirit" (Ghurye 1932 in Cohn 1990: 241).

III: ELECTIONS AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY CHANGE

COLONIAL CLASSIFICATION AND COMMUNITY POLITICS

It is arguable, therefore, that "colonialism in India produced new forms of civil society which have been presented as traditional forms" (Dirks 1989: 43). To describe caste merely as a classificatory 'trope' (Dirks 1992), ignores its social and political significance, but government classifications certainly encouraged the formation of political groups which bore little resemblance to the categories that gave rise to them. "The conversion of the Madras Government to the policies of active communal discrimination", as Washbrook notes, "was the prime factor in the development of communal politics" (1976: 273). The introduction of quotas based on communal categories meant that Indians had to adapt to British ideas of Indian society in order to take advantage of the British system.¹³ Even those in the nationalist movement who remained out-with the emerging institutions of limited self-rule, were forced to adapt to the social categories of the British when they were challenged by representatives of Untouchable, non-Brahmin, or Dravidian groups. The introduction of a limited franchise in the second and third decades of the 20th Century paved the way for new channels to power and influence. The non-Brahmin movement in South India exploited British unease over the preponderance of Brahmins in office (Rajendran 1994: 53, Washbrook 1976: 279), but they also drew on more widespread resentment of Brahmin domination and "arrogance" (Baker 1976: 28, Irshick 1986: 82). It was, however, mainly an elite protest and by no means represented or mobilised the majority of non-Brahmins. The main objective appears to have been the prestige and

¹³ Baker (1976: 322), Hardgrave (1979: 16), Irshick (1986: 5), Ramaswamy (1997: 247), and Smith (2000: 2) likewise observe how indigenous social groups had to adapt and refashion themselves in order to meet British expectations and categories.

patronage that was conferred by assuming government office (Baker 1976, Irshick 1969). It was also confined to Madras presidency, itself an administrative construction of the British government. After the franchise was extended such movements had to pay more attention to the mobilisation of potential support, but the recognition and appreciation of the fruits of office has remained central to movement aspirations in India (Price 1996, Mitra 1999). Two other legacies of the movement have been significant for the country as a whole. The first legacy was the early institution of affirmative action programmes for deprived castes, the second was the implicit assertion that social and ritual hierarchies could be challenged and renegotiated through political mobilisation and electoral competition.

The 'non-Brahmin' movement banded ninety-eight per cent of the population together solely because they were not Brahmins. This represented a category of people that was so diverse as to have no sustainable social basis, but it 'gratified British expectations' (Baker 1976: 322). To agree with this statement does not, necessarily, deny the consciousness and sentiments of the actors involved. By 1920 it had become immaterial whether the category of non-Brahmin had any actual basis in Tamil or Hindu society, as Irshick notes, "by that time the term 'non-Brahmin' had powerful political meaning" (1986: 27). Colonial classifications were not passively accepted, they were appropriated and inhabited by indigenous groups, often in ways that were wholly unpredictable.¹⁴ The processes of structural, social and discursive transformation "associated with democracy profoundly modify and transform a society's imagination of itself" (Hansen 1999: 9). The social and political shifts noted here, however, cannot be reduced to the process of democratisation alone. The example of countless developing countries even today provides evidence for the fact that there is no inevitable correlation between the social and economic transformations associated with 'modernity' and political democracy. Although the gradual breakdown of traditional authority and the opening up of the political and economic spheres may loosely be seen as a process of 'democratisation', therefore, a

¹⁴ Several authors note the process of negotiation through which indigenous groups rework and renegotiate colonial labels. For e.g. Ludden (1989: 190) notes how court battles helped shape access to public space. Irshick (1994: 7-8) and O'Toole (1996: 242) observe how the alien concepts of the British were appropriated in the construction of new meanings and ways of being. Ramaswamy (1997: 247) points out that Tamil language nationalism "was fashioned into a weapon to contend with both British colonialism and Indian nationalism", and Hansen (1999: 35) and Corbridge & Harriss (2000: 8) observe how colonial rule served to reinforce caste identities.

distinction must be drawn between the social and political senses of the term. From this perspective we can follow Kaviraj in observing that “modernity changes fundamentally what people are, what they think they are, and more fundamentally and elusively, their way of being what they are” (1997: 25). As the horizons of the segmented community locales are expanded by the growth of a cash based economy, a centralising state, and the introduction of the limited franchise, not only are ‘old’ identities challenged, but a whole raft of other identities become available. We may thus accept Lefort’s suggestion that democratisation should be understood as the gradual “dissolution of the markers of certainty” that made existing institutions of power, and the hierarchical nature of social relations appear natural and pre-determined (1988: 19, after Hansen 1999).

IDENTITY CHANGE AND SOCIAL POLITICS

Statewide caste associations, Tamil language nationalism and the non-Brahmin movement are examples of social expression that were enabled by these changes. It is possible to project these ‘new’ organisations and identity choices as creating new perceptions of an ‘old’ identity. Fox, however, sees this as unsatisfactory, for points of contact between ‘old’ and ‘new’ castes were very few indeed (Washbrook 1976: 268). Fox illustrates his point by reference to the case of the Nadars. It used to be said of the Nadar caste that they were ‘untouchable on sight’ (a saying often quoted by Dalits today). Given this, Fox argues, to portray them in the light of ‘new Nadars’, is somewhat disingenuous. Rather, he maintains, they “are westernised professionals performing important roles in the political system” (ibid. 268). By challenging the immutability of the established social order and providing opportunities for social mobility, a variety of possible self-definitions were made available. Hansen describes the history of Indian democracy as a “circumscribed questioning of hierarchies and authority, spreading from the political field” (1999: 8). Without contesting this statement, it is clear that the ‘political field’ is inseparable from the social and economic ones, and that social transformations in these spheres were prerequisites of political mobilisation. What his statement serves to highlight is the predominant role that politics has come to assume in this process of social reordering. Where the Nadars increased their status through social organisation – such as educational and employment associations - and economic improvement, therefore, the Scheduled and

Backward Caste movements today are explicitly party political in their mode of operation.

THE NON-BRAHMIN MOVEMENT & ELECTORAL POLITICS

The non-Brahmin movement is instructive of the gradual process by which the “British administrators and the Indians who interacted with them began to develop what was in effect a common understanding about appropriate techniques for political expression” (Irshick 1986: 115). The non-Brahmin movement had little impact outside the metropolis of Madras, but its mode of organisation and its immediate objectives had wider significance. Regardless of the strength, or otherwise, of communal sentiment, communal categories were established as an effective means of mobilisation. The increasing prominence of government in the everyday lives of its citizens also rendered government office an attractive and meaningful object of such movements. A more interventionist government presiding over an increasingly centralised area not only enabled the emergence of provincial politics, but also meant that ministers attained considerable power. The significance of the Justice Party victory in the 1920 Legislative Assembly polls in Madras lies less in the replacement of one clique by another, than in the manner of this reorganisation. “After 1920”, as Washbrook observes, “channels of political communication were joined and largely replaced by those of election” (1976: 326). Henceforth, political demands were arguably formulated as much to influence official policy as to attract a following. The non-Brahmin movement exemplified the increasingly secular orientation of the new organisational forms of caste and religious groups. The appeal to communal sentiment was a powerful mobilising tool for what Ramaswami Mudaliar, of the All India Non-Brahmin Congress, defined as a ‘jobocracy’ (Irschick 1969: 262). Confronted by a state with increasing powers of patronage, the new organisational forms of social categories were directed towards securing economic benefits, jobs, or special concessions (Rudolphs 1967, Kothari 1997, Swamy 1996). Once a few parties had established the efficacy of such mobilisation, as Philips indicates elsewhere, “the exigencies of competition require that the others do not lag too far behind” (1991: 81).

ELECTIONS AND SOCIAL MOBILISATION

This proposition has frequently been taken to establish a correlation between the increase in democratic institutions and the rise in social mobilisation. Whilst

acknowledging the importance of reservations to the strength of communal appeals, Gallanter maintains that the “franchise itself, with its invitation to mobilise support by appeal to existing loyalties” has been most responsible for this outcome (1997: 197).¹⁵ The argument is an obvious one: As power is opened up to electoral competition political leaders in search of an electorate draw upon existing identities and community feeling as a means by which to mobilise their supporters. These social categories make “available to the leadership structural and ideological bases for political mobilisation, providing it with both a segmental system and an identification system on which support could be crystallised” (Kothari 1997: 64). This argument undoubtedly contributes to an explanation of the continuing salience of social categories in Indian politics. Expressed in such terms, however, as most authors recognise, it is overly simplistic, and cannot elucidate the complex processes involved. I shall highlight two fundamental weaknesses of this approach. It throws no light upon the processes by which communal identities are constructed and made to ‘stick’, nor can it explain the overriding impulse to organise collectively. Secondly, a facile correlation between democracy and mobilisation cannot of itself explain the prevalence of extra-institutional, especially violent, protest, except insofar as it is geared towards political participation of the mobilising group.

DEMOCRATIC INDIVIDUALISM

The classic electoral maxim of ‘one member, one vote’, presupposes a trend towards individualism. This was the danger that De Tocqueville was most apprehensive about in the 19th century: That each individual would be so confined by his domestic affections and attachments that he would be thrown back “forever upon himself alone” (1994b (1840): 99). The willingness of people to engage in political or social movements that place their lives at risk, by contrast, suggests a stronger affinity with the group than with the individual (cf. Kakar 1996, Ramaswamy 1997). On the face of it the objection that the establishment of democracy cannot explain the continuing impulse towards collective action would appear to be misplaced in India. The democratic State, in its commitment to social justice, itself recognises certain categories of society as the beneficiaries of affirmative action programmes (Beteille

¹⁵ Rudolph & Rudolph (1987), Gould (1988), Kohli (1990), Mitra (1994), Mitra and Lewis (1996), Basu and Kohli (1998), and Hansen (1999) have all remarked upon this correlation.

1991a).¹⁶ Dumont (1980) attempts to explain the continuing salience of caste by depicting substantialised caste as a 'collective individual', in which the interests of individual caste members are seen as those of the entire group. Horizontal collective action thus becomes a natural means for the securing of concessions, rights and justice for the group as a whole.¹⁷ These concessions, however, as Roy observes, "have to be individually utilised" (1990: 46). Reservations can equally be perceived as a means of individual mobility, as is evinced by the creation of a 'harijan elite' who "tend to disassociate themselves from the degraded state of their community and orbit in an entirely new sphere" (ibid. 47).¹⁸ The identities that have so much political relevance today, according to this argument, retain little resemblance to those that they have replaced. To see the contemporary salience of communal sentiment as a continuation of tradition, therefore, seems misguided. Another answer to this problematic is to stress the different conceptions of individualism that pertain in India. Although community identity is declining, the continuing significance of 'big men' – as evinced by the popularity and significance of cinema-star fan clubs, and populist charismatic leadership – may help to explain the persistence of collective action (Mines 1994: 40-41, Price 1996: 195, Mageli 1997: 26, Widlund 2000: 15). Ties of loyalty, patronage and friendship serve to bind people to leaders, who are expected to fight on their behalf. The followers bathe in the reflected glory of their leader, and hope to achieve individual prominence by working for the 'big man' (Dickey 1993:349, 364, Mines 1994: 41, Widlund 2000: 185-7). Tocqueville's argument, however, is that democratic contest and government encourages the sort of self-centred rationalisation that is the hallmark of an individualistic society.¹⁹

¹⁶ The effects of such creations are most obviously seen in the political mobilisation of countless untouchable castes under the constitutionally created heading of the 'Scheduled Castes'.

¹⁷ Authors such as Dirks refer to this process as the 'invention of tradition'. The argument is that the identities that have so much relevance today retain little resemblance to those that they have replaced.

¹⁸ Reservations, in this light, functions to effect what Foucault terms a "reversal of the political axis of individualisation" (1977: 192). In modern societies, it is argued, reputations and community decline in importance with regard to the common individual, whereas individualisation was greatest at the summit of society under feudal systems (Dews 1984, Mines 1994). "Habermas characterises the transition as a whole as one from 'role-identity' to 'ego-identity', understanding by the latter a form of personal identity which is no longer determined by contents unreflectively inherited from cultural tradition, but is defined by the mastery of procedures of critical examination and argumentative grounding employed in the acquisition of cognitive and moral beliefs" (Dews 1984: 82). In the *History of Sexuality* (1981), Foucault similarly observes the dissolution of the forms of group identity characteristic of traditional societies. The question then becomes how and why identities that were present in traditional society have retained, if not increased, their saliency in democratic India.

¹⁹ This certainly appears to be Dumont's (1980 (1966)) interpretation when he argues that in an egalitarian system, *Homo Major* – man as a collective being – gives way to *Homo Minor*, or man as an individual.

INSTRUMENTALISM & IDENTITY

The adoption of a democratic mode of government ought to give rise to the inclusion of hitherto excluded people by extending to them the institutional means to voice their grievances. The prevalence of collective or extra-institutional protest, therefore, may reflect a failure of the institutions of interest mediation. To posit a correlation between democracy and mobilisation in this instance is to insist upon the social implications of democratic practice, which challenge existing ways of being in the world, and establish new cultural expectations about good governance. In addressing these themes many authors draw attention to the 'instrumentalist' manipulation of 'primordial' sentiments. "Ethnic conflicts", as Kohli insists, "are not inevitable expressions of deep-rooted differences."... "The process of identity formation and ethnic conflict", he continues, "is also not so indeterminate as to defy a causal analysis" (1998: 30). That is to say that the role of identity as it is currently conceived, cannot be presented merely as a primordial attachment.²⁰ Such identities cannot be taken as ascribed, in other words, but must be seen as complex constructs that both draw upon primordial categories and differ from them. Identity here refers to the process whereby social actors recognise themselves and are recognised by others as being part of wider social groups. Where identities are relational, identifying who one is not is an important aspect of asserting who one is. Collective actors may adopt identities that are more or less 'inclusive', or 'exclusive', both of which have different implications for the outlook and behaviour of the group. "Exclusive identities which define adversaries precisely as well as what is at stake in the conflict, appear to be more effective in mobilising direct participation" (Della Porta & Diani 1999: 106). The organisations of the Hindu Right, and of Backward Castes, with their respective targeting of Muslims and the Dalits testify to the efficacy of such forms of mobilisation in India. 'Inclusive' identities, by contrast, emphasise ideological or universal issues. The Dalit and Women's movement's emphasis on rights and social equality and the environmental movements fit into this category.

²⁰ Caste today, as Mitra observes, "is a resource that political actors use in order to negotiate their status, wealth, power and identity" (1999: 114). Mitra cites the existence of caste out-with Hinduism as evidence for this. Christian Dalits, for example, mobilise as Dalits rather than as Christians in order to secure state concessions. Brass (1996), Ramaswamy (1997), and Parikh (1998) similarly show how seemingly 'primordial' identities need to be constructed and inhabited in the present.

IV: DEMOCRACY & DEMONSTRATIONS

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL ACTION

Reference to identity is crucial if we are to understand people's decision to participate in collective action. In the absence of strong feelings of community, the costs and risks of social mobilisation would predispose people to avoid involvement. The 'free rider' problematic formulated by Mancur Olson (1965) is especially relevant here. Given the pre-existence of reservations on the basis communal categories, it is in the interests of individual actors to avail themselves of these rather than engage in the risky business of mobilisation. The free rider theory asserts that the 'rational' actor will not engage in collective action for common goods, since they will benefit from the success of the movement anyway (ibid. cf.: Wade 1988, Putnam 1993, Della Porta & Diani 1999). Common structural positions, it reminds us, do not automatically result in a shared consciousness. The existence of the collective actor, which is frequently taken for granted, "is in fact the product of highly differentiated social processes, action orientations, elements of structure and motivation" (Melucci 1988: 246). Rather than seeing caste change as the inevitable product of the transition from hierarchical to democratic society, therefore, we need to analyse the processes by which identities are forged and embedded in people's consciousness, and the effect of these identities on individual choices and action. Social movement theory has been instrumental in mapping this terrain, and explaining how identities are produced and made the basis of meaningful action. Since political struggles may appear to be abstract, and divorced from everyday life, a key means by which this is achieved is through what Della Porta and Diani (1999) term 'identification rituals'. 'Ritual', here, refers to an analytical category that may be defined as "symbolic behaviour that is socially standardised and repetitive" (Kerzer 1988: 9). Commonly these rituals take the form of meetings of the group in question. A series of 'identifiers', such as flags, posters, banners, and even style of clothing or behaviour not only enable the group to be recognised by others, but also reinforces a sense of unity, or 'we-ness' (Kerzer 1988, Della Porta & Diani 1999). Activists often speak of a sense of 'empowerment' which sums up a feeling of being part of a wider movement with the ability to change things (Jasper 1997).

CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITIES

A sense of community is reinforced by reference to historical figures whose ideals are aspired towards, or martyrs who died for the cause. Speeches at mass rallies emphasise shared experiences and goals in order to 'speak the group into existence' (Kerzer 1988: 18, Fine 1995: 135, Cruces & De Rada 1996: 97, Hansen 1999: 91). These common rites make disparate individuals experience a sense of being part of a much wider organisation, a sense that is given concrete expression in artefacts (such as statues) or places that have a particular resonance for the movement and that can be visited, felt and touched (Jasper 1997: 93). Caste is commonly portrayed as an ascribed condition, that individuals are born into rather than choose to bear. Caste, however, increasingly functions like ethnicity.²¹ That is to say, the local, close-kinship basis of caste networks is increasingly being rendered obsolete by transformations in communications and transport technology. Statewide alliances are the norm rather than the exception in contemporary Tamil Nadu, and an emphasis is placed on birth and blood purity rather than a caste-wide code for conduct (Barnett 1977). Such a move enables the formation of caste organisations, movements and parties that claim to speak on behalf of the entire group. In this process of transformation ascribed affinity has been forfeited for the sake of political identity. Identity, it should be stressed, is never simply 'given', but the move from locally based endogamous connections to state-wide socio-political alliances has rendered the construction of caste identity more of a conscious enterprise. This means that individuals can seek alternative sources of identity and ways of being. Collective protest is not just about identity, however, it is "pre-eminently about moral vision, for participants make claims about how the world should be, but is not" (Jasper 1997: 135).

DEPRIVATION AND DEMONSTRATIONS

Too restrictive a focus on the concept of identity can lead one to neglect the material basis of social mobilisation. Communal identities in India are not merely empty shells to be filled by the rhetoric of self-seeking populists. They frequently have a real basis in the physical segregation of communities, in differences of occupation, in the food people eat, or in ties (if only fictitious) of kinship. It is uncommon for close friendships to be made, or to persist, across these divides, and though inter caste

²¹ Gould (1988: 11), Searle-Chatterjee & Sharma (1994: 20), Fuller (1996: 25), Subramanian (1999: 2-3), and Corbridge & Harriss (2000: 176) have all remarked on the 'ethnicisation' of caste.

marriages are now recognised as occurring, they are still frowned upon (Chowdhry 1998, Geetha 1998). "Caste", as James Manor puts it, "possesses material substance" (1997: 266). This 'substance' is most visible in the lingering practices of untouchability, in endogamous marriage groups, and the continuing isolation of Dalits in 'cheris' or specific urban neighbourhoods (see Chapter 5). "The members of social movements", as Desroches, Wielenga, and Patel observe, "do not simply want to imitate the life style and customs of privileged groups, but rather ... they seek to remove their relative deprivation" (1991: 17). Collective action is often motivated by a sense of deprivation or insecurity.²² For marginalized or excluded groups, collective action may be the only means of political participation, since the maxim of 'one man, one vote' is made a mockery of in situations where political equality antedates social equality. "The ability to impose negative and stigmatised definitions of the identity of other groups", as Della Porta and Diani remind us, "constitutes, effectively, a fundamental mechanism of social domination" (1999: 92). The more oppressed sections of society have found it most difficult to overcome the legacy of their dependency, powerlessness, and segmentation.²³

THE COMMUNAL 'OTHER'

Communal identities are often based on forms of knowledge of other communities which draw upon "everyday forms of mutual mis-recognition and suspicion that characterise the co-existence of Hindus and Muslims, as well as caste groups, in so many places in contemporary India" (Hansen 1999: 203, Gould 1988, Kakar 1996). This highlights the significance of 'naming' in the construction of political realities. "The labels we apply constitute our understanding of the world: they direct concern, outrage, and sympathy; they allocate blame, praise and trust" (Jasper 1997: 85). If naming one's own group is a significant aspect of the construction of an identity, then naming one's opponents is equally, if not more so. The forms of mobilisation inspired by such discourses are an indication of the new field of identity choices that are

²² It is one thing to be faced by 'not much of a choice' in France or Britain, to paraphrase Castañeda, it is "quite another to accept a similar foreclosing of options in the slums" of India (1993: 328).

²³ It is only through organising themselves that such groups can force their demands into the political mainstream. Organisational pluralism may mean that such mobilisation has a better chance of being accommodated, but it does not in itself encourage such direct action. Rather, it is the radical ideology/practice of Untouchable protest, as Constable (2000) notes, that has provided the agency and dynamic for the re-formation of cultural identities. See also the work of Rudolphs 1987, Saberwal 1997, Majumdar 1999, Corbridge & Harriss 2000, Jeffrey 2000, Pai 2001

available to Indian citizens, but they also increase the risk and the occurrence of new forms of violence, conflict and disorder. Collective mobilisations, as social movement theorists have noted, may encourage and 'empower' members, but they frequently give rise to counter mobilisations. Attacks on Dalits by Backward Castes have increased in intensity and number, in part because they fear that the Dalits are becoming their equals (Vincentnathan 1996: 494, Chowdhry 1998: 333, Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998: 12, Rajalakshmi 2001: 40).²⁴

VIOLENCE AND (IR)RATIONAL PROTEST

'Crowd theorists' constructed an image of collective actors as 'mobs' of desperate people acting in 'irrational' ways (Jasper 1997: 20, Rudé 1995: 8-9, Thompson 1991: 265). The scale of violence perpetrated against Dalits and Muslims which heightens their precarious sense of insecurity, and the self-immolation of upper-caste protestors against the implementation of the Mandal Commission, appear to support such an analysis. The communal riots in Bombay, the breakdown of law and order in Bihar, the atrocities allegedly perpetrated by the People's War Group in Andhra, and the conflicts in Assam, Kashmir and Sri Lanka serve as ever present reminders of where an escalation of conflict can culminate. In Orientalist depictions, as Mitra (1999: 259) shows, the Indian mind is presented as incapable of individual rationality, since even individual preferences and opinions are seen as conditioned by the family, caste or tribe to which they belong. As Weiner notes, however, in India there is "a deep and justifiable fear of uncontrollable violence among religious caste and linguistic groups" (1997: 250). At the village or panchayat level this violence is rooted in the conflicts between dominant, land-owning and rich middle peasant castes, and landless labourers/Scheduled castes who have few resources but an increasing consciousness of their rights (Desroches et al. 1991, Satyamurthy 1997, Chowdhry 1998, Pai 2000). In the urban conglomerates such antipathy is nurtured in residential segregation and mutual stereotypes.²⁵ The prevalence of such sources of enmity means that they are seen as endemic, or 'normal', parts of the social and political imaginary. It becomes

²⁴ The widespread targeting of Muslims, for example, has spawned groups such as Al-Umma, which is said to be responsible for the horrific bomb blasts in Coimbatore in 1998. The extension of reservations to OBC's in 1990 also caused upper caste youth to engage in mass protests and even set fire to themselves.

²⁵ Hansen identifies certain areas of 'condensed' conflict, or 'trouble spots', where "communal violence and enmities are regular features of their social and political organisation" (1999: 205). Ali

critical then for us to achieve a better understanding of how this 'normal' state becomes a pathological one. Alternatively, why, given the ubiquity of fault lines in society, is violence not a more customary feature of politics than it is? The answer, in part, lies in the fact that actors are not as irrational or despairing as many authors would lead us to believe. Even that most impetuous of the crowd's activities - the riot - has been shown by Thompson to constitute "a rational response, that takes place, not among helpless or hopeless people, but among those groups who sense that they have a little power to help themselves" (1991: 265, cf. Tambaiah 1996: 216).

V: PROTEST NORMS: LEGITIMISING NOTIONS & ACTION REPERTOIRES **WHY AND HOW PEOPLE REBEL**

The image of India as a land of non-violence and passivity that has acquired a certain currency through idealised depictions of Gandhi, and the victims of the Bengal famine, may be dismissed as a chimera. The portrayal that often replaces it - of a country suffused by political disorder and violence, and lacking in legitimacy - is equally exaggerated. Except in a few instances in certain areas, democratic India has not witnessed widespread and sustained violence. Violent conflict along caste, communal or ethnic lines *has* been endemic, but this has tended to occur on a local level and has usually been contained through a mixture of state repression, compromise and co-optation. For the most part the legitimacy of the federal state has not been subject to question. Comprehensive and significant studies of these issues have appeared recently, and a more detailed examination may be found in their pages.²⁶ A few of the salient points and arguments will be referred to here, however, and an attempt to answer the questions posed above will be made through recourse to social movement theory and the work of social historians. It is my contention that the absence of prolonged conflict, the continuing legitimacy of the state, and the prevalence of extra-institutional mobilisation as a means of interest articulation, may fruitfully be analysed in terms of 'repertoires' of action. Social movements have to take into account the forms of organisation and action that are recognised as acceptable to the wider community. In the absence of such 'legitimising notions',

Asghar Engineer, similarly, highlights areas where there is what he terms an "arithmetic of violence" (In Austin 1994: 45).

²⁶ See for example: Rudolphs (1987), Kohli (1990), Roy & Sissons (1990), Mitra (1992), Mitra & Lewis (1996), Kaviraj (1997), Mitra & Rothermund (1997), Basu & Kohli (1998), Nandy (1998), Hansen (1999), Mitra (1999), Subramanian (1999).

collective actors lay themselves open to the risk of state repression and alienation from the wider constituency of people towards whom they are directed.

MORAL ECONOMIES AND ACTION REPERTOIRES

People's legitimisation of protest, Thompson argues, is "grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor" (1991: 188). This concept of the 'moral economy', like that of Scott's (1985) 'hidden transcript', helps to explain the underlying understandings that participants in social protest draw upon. Thus it is that protest movements tend only to innovate within certain parameters or during times of great political upheaval (Zashin 1972). In circumstances of rapid social change these understandings can be substantially altered or even wholly overthrown within a very short space of time. The moral assumptions of the contemporary Dalit community, such as the demand for access to temples, wells and common land, draw upon the constitutional provisions of democratic India in challenging the more 'traditional view of social norms' that the Backward and Upper castes continue to enforce. The significance of these concepts is that they emphasise the general belief amongst protestors that they are supported by a wider consensus. Over time a collective memory, or repertoire, of forms of action, modes of organisation, indeed the "whole set of means (a group) has for making claims of different types" is evolved (Tilly 1986: 2). Using standard forms of protest is a means of claiming legitimacy by following in the footsteps of past political movements (Kerzer 1988: 122, Mitra 1996: 21, Della Porta & Diani 1999: 184). The history of the nationalist, non-Brahmin and sub-nationalist movements in India has provided a diverse palette of organisational possibilities for collective actors to select from. "The existing repertoire", however, as Tilly stresses, also "constrains collective action" (1986: 390 – cf. Putnam 1993). The AIADMK activists who set fire to three college buses in Dharaupuri early in 2000 were met with widespread condemnation and revulsion. This outcry was not prompted by the act of vehicular arson, for the targeting of Government buses has become a standard form of protest across India. Rather it was the tragic deaths of three of the college students who were unable to escape the inferno that transgressed the bounds of public tolerance.²⁷

²⁷ In 'Violence as Protest', Fogel (1968) makes a similar point with regard to political violence in the West. Urban riots in 18th century Europe, he argues, "were articulate not only because the elites

LEARNING TO PROTEST

People do not simply 'act collectively'. Rather, they conform to culturally determined repertoires of action. "No less than in the case of religious rituals or civic celebrations, contentious politics is not born in the organizer's heads but is culturally inscribed and socially communicated. The learned conventions of contention are a part of society's public culture" (Tarrow 1998: 20). There is, in other words, a culturally recognised and accepted gamut of protest forms that have been tried, tested and introduced into the public arena. "Situated between the institutional and radical alternatives is a range of methods of uncertain legality such as *gherao*, *dharna*, *boycott*, and protest movements like *satyagraha*, *rasta-roko*, *jail bhor*, *hartal*, *bandh* and *morcha* whose ubiquitous presence has made them an integral part of Indian political discourse" (Mitra 1992: 9, Rudolphs 1987). In contemporary western democracies such methods occasionally bring an element of unpredictability into the everyday routines of institutional politics, but in India they constitute a routinised aspect of life.²⁸ The prevalence of extra-institutional politics is often expected to result in a loss of legitimacy but, as Mitra suggests, institutional participation and radical protest, may be "perceived as complementary forms of action" (ibid. 210). Demonstrations, rallies, hunger fasts and protest meetings frequently culminate in lobbying the Legislative Assembly, in the presentation of a petition to the governor, or in the speech of a supportive MLA or MP. Although extra-institutional protest implicitly or explicitly challenges the legitimacy of institutions of interest mediation, therefore, it is clear that political parties perceive protestors as potential constituents and supporters (Rudolphs 1987). Collective protest emerges out of the disjunction between the demands raised by mobilised groups and those that get onto the Government agenda (Scott 1991, Mitra 1992). Since the legitimacy of the democratic state rests upon the recognition and representation of diverse interests and demands, the assimilation of emerging demands into the political mainstream may enhance institutional legitimacy (Zashin 1972, Rudolphs 1987, Subramanian 1999).

understood them, but also because in view of the mob's potential for disorder *the violence was restrained*" (1968: 38 emphasis added).

²⁸ The temporality of this statement is evident from a perusal of Connery, R (ed.) *Urban Riots* (1968). In that volume Smith notes that violence is now ever-present in western democracies, and is "employed in a self-conscious fashion to achieve political ends (1986: 116).

VI: POWER NEGOTIATIONS: DIRECT ACTION & INSTITUTIONS

STATE & SOCIETY

The role of the government and the state are of vital significance in this process of power negotiation (Jenkins 1995, Rudolphs 1987, Subramanian 1999, Corbridge & Harriss 2000). Whether the state is tolerant of, or tries to repress, any particular group is crucial to the group's sustainability. Along the wide spectrum ranging from outright repression to accommodation lies a multitude of possible state responses. By choosing to turn a blind eye to local disputes, for example, the police can inordinately increase the levels of oppression that subordinated groups are subjected to (Chowdhry 1998, Subramanian & Harriss-White 1999). Equally, when such a group attempts to mobilise in protest, the authorities can render or deny permission for meetings and rallies, make preventative arrests or provide protection, disrupt or enhance the organisation of a movement and concede or deny the demands of the protestors. Electoral instability increases the propensity to support protest, according to Della Porta and Diani (1999), since it heightens the requirement for new sources of electoral support. A weak government, however, is just as likely to resort to repression for fear of being toppled. This equation is also rendered more problematic by the fact that social movements need to show their strength and popularity, before established political parties can be induced to recognise the expediency of forging an electoral alliance with them. Such an alliance does not necessarily benefit the collective actors as much as the party, however, since they are rarely in a position of strength when negotiating terms with an established institution. The example of the Paatali Makkal Katchi (Toiler's Party) in Tamil Nadu is a prime example of this problematic. Initially branded as extremists, the party has subsequently done well in the polls and forged alliances with both the major parties in the state. The PMK is not yet seen as an equal partner, however, as is evinced by continued political wrangling between them and their allies. The PMK is portrayed by turns as an ally in the ruling coalition and a threat to the security of the state.

"The time worn response to dissent" in India, as Nandy asserts, "is to neutralise it by absorbing it into the mainstream" (1998: 51). Such co-option, as the above example shows, is not always possible nor is it complete. Small parties profit from political instability by wresting greater concessions from the parties that seek their support. In 2001, for instance, the PMK and the Liberation Panthers swapped coalitions (to the

AIADMK and DMK camps respectively) in the belief that the alternative offered them greater potential to influence policy.²⁹ Co-option also, would only appear to be feasible when the collective actors are not seeking to establish an alternative power structure. Kohli's study of ethnic nationalism points to a different conclusion, however. "Given a well established central authority and firm but compromising leaders", he notes, "self-determination movements typically follow the shape of an inverse U-curve". His argument is that group mobilisation is encouraged under democratic processes. As these collectivities coalesce around a common objective they enter into a protracted phase of conflict and negotiation with the state. In this phase "some leaders are repressed, others are co-opted and a modicum of genuine power sharing and mutual accommodation ... is reached" (1998: 8). Although this pattern was diagnosed by reference to sub-national movements it may be extended to other forms of communal mobilisation.

RECOGNISED REPERTOIRES

In Tamil Nadu at least, the successive stages of mobilisation, confrontation and accommodation could almost be said to come out of a textbook of collective action. From the non-Brahmin movement in the 1920s to the Dalit and Backward caste movements today, mobilisation has tended to follow a broadly similar pattern. When Paatali Makkal Katchi (The Toiler's Party – a Backward Caste Group) or Puthiya Tamilagam (New Tamilnadu – a Dalit party) activists felled trees, blocked roads and led violent agitation across the state, they were echoing the past struggles of the self-respect movement, and the Dravidian party's anti-Hindi protests. That the two main parties in Tamil Nadu rode to power on the back of direct action has created a repertoire in which violence and extra-institutional action is recognised as following the informal 'rules of the game'. Such recurring forms of collective behaviour are not accidents of circumstance. Rather, as the speeches of movement leaders evince, they are conscious echoes of past struggles and may, thus, be said to constitute a type of

²⁹ In the aftermath of the 2001 Assembly Elections, Muralidharan observed that "the particular exigencies of coalition politics today ensure that there are no permanent friends or adversaries in national and State politics" (2001: 13). Whilst he notes that the institutionalised opposition between the two main Dravidian parties eludes this generalisation, it is apparent that there has been an erosion of political loyalty among the smaller parties. This uncertainty constitutes both an opportunity and a constraint for the smaller, emergent, groups. It is an opportunity in the sense that the major parties have to seek out and recognise smaller parties, but it acts as a constraint in the sense that their importance can diminish overnight. The importance of the DPI to both the TMC and the AIADMK, for example, was negligible when the opportunity to ally with the PMK became available.

collective memory about the limits and possibilities of protest. Indeed, even “sub-nationalism, seen from this angle, appears to be tactic, whose objectives are broadly legitimate even though they may not be so in a narrowly legal sense” (Mitra 1996: 5, cf. Dasgupta 1998: 213). Given this consensus about the broad patterns of culturally acceptable protest, it should not be surprising to find similar consensus about conflict management. In his study of insurgency in the North East of India, Dasgupta indicates some factors that serve to exacerbate conflict. The ‘proper institutional processing’ of even violent demands, it is asserted, can accommodate ‘dangerous enemies’ into the democratic process. He warns, however, that where “national or regional authorities use cynical, unscrupulous, or simply unintelligent ways of manipulating ethnicity or insurgency, then the state itself can become a dangerous enemy of the democratic system” (Dasgupta: 1998: 210).

CONTAINING THE VIOLENCE

To cast all blame for the escalation of conflicts at the feet of the state would obviously be mistaken. The Tamil Nationalist LTTE’s marked reluctance to enter into negotiations in Sri Lanka shows that institutional processing needs to be not only ‘proper’, but early – before the conflict assumes a logic of its own. Oberst (1996) suggests that the initial intransigence of the Sri Lankan State contributed as much as other factors to the escalation of the conflict. The persistent violence in Bihar and Andhra, however, points to the need for different solutions and a more nuanced analysis of events. Where structural factors perpetuate the conditions of the conflict, a solution may require alterations in land-holdings and agrarian relations that would prompt violent counter-mobilisation by those whose interests are attacked (Zashin 1972, Vincentnathan 1996, Jeffrey 2000). Similarly when a group’s identity is based in part upon the caricature of an evil ‘other’, accommodating them into rival political parties could merely provide an institutional basis for their antagonism, and render the exercise of the franchise a period for violent recriminations. “Dispersal of power”, as Della Porta and Diani observe, “increases the chances of access not just for social movements but for *all* political actors, including counter-movements” (1999: 200). The nature of democratic governance is such that a degree of institutionalised conflict is unavoidable. “In the abstract”, therefore, as Basu concludes, “it would seem that an accommodating, conciliatory state would be highly desirable in India” (1998: 248, cf. Subramanian 1999). A caveat to be added here is that not all mobilisations are equally

democratic in approach, nor do collective actors always seek democratic objectives. The destruction of the Babri Masjid, or the social boycott of Dalit villagers, would be examples of movements that are pursuing inherently undemocratic ends. The conciliatory attitude of the state towards such mobilisation of communal sentiment has resulted in bloodshed and destruction rather than the expansion of democracy (cf. Chowdhry 1998: 337, Rajalakshmi 2001: 40).

Subramanian asserts that organisational pluralism can lead to social pluralism and tolerance, but the distinction between the State and the Government in India is sometimes blurred. The persistence of webs of patronage emanating from the state results in alterations in personnel following each successive electoral transformation.³⁰ The impartiality of the state apparatus, therefore, is sometimes open to question. Given this, it seems prudent to follow Swamy in the assertion that a significant alternation of parties in office can “affect the conditions under which parties might turn to violence” (1998: 109). Swamy contends that this suggestion is “contingent upon the accuracy of the claim ... that parties are indeed responsible for instigating and co-ordinating certain kinds of violence” (ibid. 109). The waves of violence attending the Dravidian parties’ accession to power, and the violence unleashed by the PMK before gaining office and now when that office is threatened, seems to corroborate this statement. This may well account for the fact that despite evincing all the conditions that are generally thought to be conducive to political violence, Tamil Nadu remains remarkably stable politically. The alteration of the two major parties in power appears to be able to accommodate the periodic cycles of violence that arise. Much of the violence today is the product of as yet excluded groups seeking to establish themselves, and of the vested interests that seek to maintain their isolation. Visible alterations of power serve to affirm the efficacy of the franchise and engender at worst “illusions of reform and participation” (Casteñeda 1993: 335), and potentially an avenue through which collective actors can channel their concerns.

³⁰ A graphic example of this propensity for incoming governments to alter the make-up of the civil and police services was provided in the aftermath of the 2001 Assembly Elections in Tamil Nadu. T.S. Subramanian in *Frontline* suggests that many officials were transferred to facilitate the prosecution of political opponents (2001a: 10).

DALITS, DEMOCRACY AND DISORDER

Arguably the current upsurge in radical Dalit politics, and extra-political mobilisation, is merely a continuation of the process of normal politics. In this light, the eruption of Dalit protest does not necessarily presage escalating cycles of violence. Rather, it constitutes a demand for greater representation, for human rights, and for better access to and share of resources. The path that they are treading now is not an uncharted one, but the well-worn route to political influence that the Dravidian and Backward Caste parties have trodden before, and that the Rudolphs (1987) describe as 'demand politics'. Already we can trace the faint outlines of a predictable solution as the Liberation Panthers and Puthiya Tamilagam ally themselves to alternate Dravidian parties rather than rejecting their overtures. In this perspective, Tamil politics can be presented as part of a much wider pattern of political protest and negotiation. The increase in contentious politics, as Tarrow observes, has largely been confined to the peaceful forms of protest associated with "the conventional repertoire" (1998: 206). Indeed it is the threatened forces of caste dominance and privilege that are more prone to violent breaches of the accepted norms than Dalit movements. Dalit movements, according to this depiction, represent the forces of continuity as much as those of change. What *is* 'new' and radical about current Dalit protest, thus, is not so much the strategies that they adopt, as the structural position of the protestors and the ideals that they espouse. The political awakening that started with the Brahmin monopolisation of provincial politics in the 1910s and 1920s can be seen to have worked its way through the ranks to the very lowest members of society. Indian democracy, we can conclude, is working and ever more sectors of society are being incorporated into the mainstream. Such analysis is attractive, but it is only partly sustainable. To posit the status quo as the object of Dalit protest would be to minimise its significance. The increasing political profile of Dalit mobilisation has not been reflected in alterations to the structure of the agrarian economy. If anything, the immediate position of the rural Dalits has been worsened by their political success. Counter mobilisation of BC groups has led to violent attacks on Dalit villages and the imposition of debilitating social boycotts (Chowdhry 1998: 351, Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998: 12, Rajalakshmi 2001: 38-9).

CONCLUSION

In the vast scholarly body that exists in this field, it is a daring task to try and isolate certain traits and patterns that appear to have more relevance than others for the purpose of one specific study. This chapter has focused on the dialectical relationship between demonstrations and democratisation. It is irrefutable that the exigencies of democratic electoral competition broaden the arena of political contest, and encourage the mobilisation of new constituencies and voters. It is also evident that self-interested populists may attempt to re-forge traditional identities and play upon communal fears and sentiments to construct a meaningful vote-bank. To reduce collective action to the demands of electoral competition, however, is a gross oversimplification that denies what Jasper (1997) terms: the 'art' of political protest. As we shall see in the next chapter, extra-institutional protest consists of complex processes of identity formation, ritual action and protest, which draw upon an established set of norms and repertoires of action. The concept of a collective memory bank of 'repertoires of action' is a useful analytical tool that can contribute to our understanding of social mobilisation in India. It is perhaps most significant in casting light on the ways by which radical protest can come to be seen as complementary to 'normal' politics, and in explaining the continuing stability of Indian democracy in the face of such diverse pressures. The history of social mobilisation and protest arguably underpins the resilience and strength of relatively new institutions like the PMK or *Puthiya Tamizhagam* (Mitra 1999). The response of the state has also been seen to be crucial to the emergence and form of such movements. Further detailed studies of these processes and relations are obviously called for, but on the basis of this study we may tentatively echo the conclusions of Alexis De Tocqueville. "Freedom of association in political matters", he maintained, "is not so dangerous to public tranquillity as may be supposed, and possibly, after having agitated society for some time, it may strengthen that state in the end" (1994b: 118). Equally however, unless the status quo is altered the disillusioned and disenfranchised mass of deprived citizens may threaten the very state itself. The social and material conditions of protest, in other words, cannot be ignored or downplayed. It is these issues that are discussed in the following chapters.

CHAPTER THREE: VICTIMISATION, VIOLENCE AND VALOUR:

The Context of Dalit Activism in Tamil Nadu

*Suppressed has been the slave instinct,
What has broken and dispersed it,
Is the Dalit Movement*

Popular Movement Song

INTRODUCTION

Across Tamilnadu, in cities, towns and villages, statues, portraits, posters and nameplates bearing the image of Dr Ambedkar proliferate. Ambedkar halls, schools and colleges abound, and even the ideological opponents of the first Law Minister of independent India feel obliged to reproduce his picture and lay claim to his legacy. This, of course, indicates the rise of Ambedkar as a pan-Indian figure, but the importance to this thesis is what it signifies about Dalit politics. Ambedkar may have chaired the drafting committee of the constitution, but he is primarily identified as a symbol of Dalit assertion and organisation. 'Ambedkarisation' in Tamil Nadu, thus reflects the increasing prominence of Dalit movements and parties in the state, and charts a new sense of confidence amongst the Tamil Dalits. As a process, however, the mobilisation of the Dalit community has been far from inevitable. This chapter examines the rise of Dalit movements in their social context in order to evaluate the problems of mobilising the lowest sectors of society and the risks associated with activism. Moffatt (1979) found that Untouchables in Tamilnadu live in consensus with the caste system and try to replicate the structures from which they are excluded rather than challenge them. I question the validity of this and argue that Dalits are able to critique the caste system on its own terms and articulate alternative, more egalitarian, conceptions of the self and of society. The chapter points to the continuing importance of repression in maintaining the subordination of the Dalits. It then considers the rise of assertive Dalit movements and the rhetorical devices used to forge unity amongst, and overcome the fears of, Dalit activists.

THE TWO GLASS SYSTEM

Somankottai is a small village in the south west of Tamil Nadu, on the main road between the two regional centres of Mulanoor and Dharapuram in Erode District. Alighting from the bus, two of my friends and I stopped to have a cup of tea at the

tea-stall cum general store immediately opposite the bus stand. As is usual, the owner brewed the tea made with milk and plenty of sugar and then poured it into our silver cups and back into the pot several times to stir the sugar in, and to make it frothy on top. He then passed the cups over to us, and we stood aside to enjoy the drink. As we did so, one of a group of men who were gathered nearby strolled over to the counter and helped himself to one of the glass cups on the side of the bar. He rinsed it out very thoroughly at the tap in the front of the shop, gargled a few times, and then placed the cup on the counter. Having ordered a tea he then wandered away to speak to his friends. The owner prepared the tea in the usual way, but then just poured it into the glass as it stood on the counter without touching it. When he called out that the tea was ready, the other man returned, picked up his cup and walked nonchalantly away. We drank more slowly and waited for him to return. Eventually he did. Casually he leant down to the outside tap and washed the glass, less rigorously this time, before placing it back from whence he had taken it. Calling for the owner to 'put it on account', he left the shop. Not once in the transaction had the owner handled the glass. My friends and I, handed back our cups, paid and left. We were not expected to wash up after ourselves.

The two friends, Edwin and Inba, are both Dalits. Both, however, have been raised in the more egalitarian environment of a seminary in Tamil Nadu. Neither of them had seen the 'two-glass' system, as it is known, practised so blatantly before. The 'two-glass' system refers to the once prevalent practise of serving Untouchables in a separate receptacle to everyone else, because they were seen as dirty and impure. Traditionally the 'glass' would have been a half-coconut shell and would have hung on a hook outside the stall. Much has changed in the past fifty years, and the example above is, if not exceptional, no longer the norm. It does, however, point to the persistence of social inequality and domination that has not been eradicated by legal dictat, and highlights the need to examine the material bases of Dalit movement activity. One of my friends was appalled. "I could not live like that", he said, shaking his head, "I would rather die than lead such an existence". Edwin's view reflects the feelings of many Dalit activists who see their struggle as vital to establishing their dignity as human beings. This 'Dalit standpoint perspective' holds that society as a whole can only be liberated (can only find its true humanity) if the Dalits are first regarded as equal. In this sense the Dalit struggle is that of the entire community.

Inba, however, took a different stand. He has more experience in village life, and has trained as a pastor in rural areas of Tamil Nadu. Rural villagers lack the easy assumption, and assertion, of equality that their urban counterparts are achieving. When one depends upon the dominant castes for food, shelter, work and security, it is harder to raise one's voice in protest. "They don't see it as a big deal", Inba explains, "they just wash the glass. At least that way you know that it is clean". For such co-operation we should not forget, they get tea on account, the local landlords provide them with work, and they are able to use the common resources of the village.

WILLING VICTIMS? THE INTERNALISATION DEBATE

Co-operative attitudes and practices have been interpreted to mean that the Untouchables live in consensus with the established social order (Moffatt 1979, Mandal Commission 1980, Racine & Racine 1997). The Untouchables, as Weber put it, are said to have "internalised" the Hindu order (1958: 41). A perennial debate in studies of the ex-Untouchables is the extent to which they share the values of the hierarchical system that oppresses them. Authors such as Weber have pointed to the absence of overt rebellion as indicative of cultural consensus. This assertion, however, has been challenged by the work of 'subalternist' historians, and by social anthropologists such as Deliège (1997), who have highlighted the 'hidden history' of protest and repression of the lower castes. Dumont's (1980(1966)) and Moffatt's (1979) structural analyses have led them to conclude that the values of hierarchy pervade the whole of caste society. In a highly controversial study Moffatt claims to have gone beyond the explicit and superficial manifestations of domination and resistance to reveal the implicit and unarticulated structures of cultural life (1979: 290). At this 'deeper level' of Indian village life, he maintains, "Untouchables and higher-caste actors hold virtually identical cultural constructs ... they are in nearly total conceptual and evaluative consensus with one another" (Moffatt 1979: 291). He bases this claim on the finding that the Untouchables of Endavur "recreate among themselves virtually every relation and institution from which they have been excluded for reason of their untouchability" (ibid: 89).

An obvious criticism of Moffatt's structural analysis is that it ignores the changes that have occurred in the caste system over time, and which are evident in his own work. Other empirical studies have challenged the assertion that the caste system rested

upon shared values. Moffatt's thesis has inspired criticism and debate on the issue of normative consensus (Sharma 1999). The view from the bottom, as Berreman (1963) and Mencher (1991) observe, is very different from that at the top. There is a distinction between rhetoric and practice amongst the lower castes. What a Paraiyar displays in his assertion that he will not accept water from a lower caste, therefore, is merely that he is cognisant of the *ideological* opposition between the pure and the impure or of the hierarchical pecking order in their locality. In fact, as Delière (1992: 162, 1997: 114) argues, such distinctions are rarely made in *practice*. Furthermore several authors have pointed out the egalitarian emphasis of Dalit communities in intra-caste relationships.¹ Even if this does not translate into inter-caste interaction, it shows that hierarchy does not pervade every level of social relations in India, and it provides a basis from which to critique hierarchical practices. Whilst Dalit castes may engage in the same touch-me-not-ism displayed towards them with regard to other low castes, therefore, this cannot be read as belief in the notions of *ritual* status.² That it is primarily a claim for higher *social* status may be seen in a rejection of their own inferiority in relation to those castes that are slightly above them in the ritual hierarchy (Gould 1988, Kapadia 1995, Delière 1997). In his study of Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu Mosse (1994) suggests the possibility of a middle way between the extremes of cultural consensus and rejection. He insists that "social protest need not be premised upon disjunction", and that cultural consensus need not rule out political activism (Mosse 1994: 99). Certainly those castes which have succeeded in mobilising against their subordination often seek to confirm their status through the adoption of distinctive titles, such as Pallar movements' adoption of the sanskritised term 'Devendra Kula Vellala' (Loosely translated this mean the 'exalted group of Vellalas').

AMBIVALENCE OR ACCEPTANCE?

Sharma (1999) attempts to resolve the debate by suggesting that members of the lower castes are ambivalent about their position. It is true that different contexts elicit

¹ Gough (1981), Vincentnathan (1993), Kapadia (1995), Delière (1997), Charsley and Karanth (1998) provide ethnographic studies which illustrate the more egalitarian basis of relationships *within* Dalit castes.

² Vincentnathan (1993: 53) argues that Untouchable's "concepts of person and society .. differ from those of caste Hindus. Mosse (1994: 68) insists that "structuralist interpretations of Harijan society have underestimated the tensions and conflicts which underlie apparent consensus". Kapadia (1995:3)

differing reactions from the Dalits who are often ambivalent about caste *society*, but I would contest the assertion that Dalits are “deeply ambivalent about the *values* of caste” (1999: 57, emphasis added). Both Sharma (1999) and Racine (1998) insist that differences in analysis may owe as much to methodological problems as to empirical observation. “If we hear only those who articulate their anger, protest or expectation, what about those who remain silent?” (Racine 1998: 3). In their studies of Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu Racine and Racine (1997, 1998) draw upon the narrative of an illiterate Dalit woman whom they call Viramma. Viramma is said to share “the consensus that places the Dalits at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and accepts the rationale of a system based on ‘purity’” (1998: 7). She also “accepts the concepts of Karma and dharma” (ibid). Racine and Racine’s work is important because they do not attempt to construct a timeless model of structural consensus, as Moffatt does. Rather they base their account upon life histories and interviews, and they are fully aware of contemporary developments. They imply, however, that Dalit movements are radical innovations; the product of a younger generation that has been exposed to egalitarian ideologies. “While Viramma takes pride in adhering to the Pariah’s dharma, her son, exposed to modern reformist discourses, wishes to uphold his self-respect” (ibid. 7). In sum, the Racines draw upon empirical observation to reinforce the idea that the Untouchables, the older ones at least, are the willing accomplices of their subordination.

Research findings *are* profoundly influenced by the area of study, the nature of the respondents and questions that are posed by the researcher. In Tamil Nadu it is certainly possible to find many Virmmas who are afraid of the militancy of their young people. Although Gough (1960: 44) found that ex-Untouchables displayed a “fanatical passion for equality”, such passion has never been echoed by all Dalits, least of all with regard to sexual equality. Many Dalits today are still dependent upon the upper castes for labour and they are wary of engaging in social or political action. Indeed, as the example from Somankottai shows, many Dalits still acquiesce to overt forms of submission. My contention is not that all Dalits are egalitarian or angry, but I do not accept that Dalits live in total consensus with a hierarchical system based on purity and pollution. A history of conversion to Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam and

notes how Tamil Dalits have the counter-cultural ideologies of the Dravidian and Self-Respect movements with which to critique the Brahmin model.

Christianity, migration and flight both within and out of India, and the attempt to Sanskritise caste practices all testify to the numerous 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985) which have been employed against the dominant values of society.³ Many authors have also noted the prevalence of Untouchable myths of origin, which explain the low standing of Dalits today in terms that implicitly or explicitly reject the impurity ascribed to them (Rudolphs 1967, Lynch 1969, Mosse 1994, Zelliott 1996, Charsley 1998, Pai 2001). Racine and Racine (1998) themselves note the prevalence of the *Bhakti* tradition in South India which dates back to the 8th Century. They observe, however, that it was soon assimilated into mainstream Hinduism and that it did not aim to "dismantle the caste system" (1998: 8). They likewise stress that the socio-cultural world of the Dalits is distinct from the brahminical model, especially in the relative autonomy that it accords to women (ibid. 7). Whilst acknowledging the existence of such forms of proto-protest to, and disjunction from, the dominant social values, however, Racine and Racine fail to explore their implications.

DO WE NOT BLEED? DALIT CRITIQUES OF INEQUALITY

These forms of resistance exhibit the ability of Dalits to interpret their own lives and identities in ways that differ markedly from the upper caste constructions. In contradistinction to Mosse (1994), I would argue that cultural disjunction does not always preclude political conservatism. There are many reasons for people to work within the hierarchy of purity and pollution, and even to practice the rules prescribed by it. These range from a fear of demons and the inertial authority of habit, through to a desire for personal or group advancement or the fear of violence and the requirements of subsistence (cf. Agarwal 1994). Authors who insist that Dalits live(d) in agreement with the system have arguably underestimated the levels of repression employed against them and the absence of economic resources or alternatives (Wade 1988, Delière 1997, Karanth 1998). Years of subordination cannot but have left their impress upon the oppressed. B.D. Scharma, the Commissioner for the SCs and STs, observes that the Dalits have been reduced to the "psychological state of accepting deprivation and destitution as justified and proper" (1990: iv). Fanon, Césaire and the Indian National Congress have made similar claims about the psychological effect of colonisation, which infused its subjects with "fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation,

³ Agarwal (1994) makes a similar point about the perceived acquiescence of women in their subordination.

servility, despair, abasement” (Fanon in Caste 1970: 7). Indeed, resistance only exists as part of a binary opposition the obverse of which is domination. Whilst the dominant conceptions of the world cannot prescribe the world-view of the dominated classes they do have the power to naturalise the social order (Foucault 1980, Scott 1985, Hall 1988, Agarwal 1994, Hirsch & Black 1994). The material basis of the caste system condemns Dalits to a life of servility that threatens their own sense of self-respect and worth. Compliance with this system, however, should not be taken as consensus, for people may both participate in a culture and resist it at the same time (Scott 1985, Parish 1996). In responding to the place that they have been assigned, “they have to find ways of knowing themselves that neutralises the way they are defined as social persons in terms of their caste identities” (Parish 1996: 102, cf. Vincentnathan 1993, Mosse 1994).

Such ways of knowing are arguably to be found in the *Bhakti* cults of South India, or the alternative life-styles of the lower castes, that are so easily dismissed by Racine. The assertion that all are equal in the eyes of God, which underpinned the *Bhakti* tradition, is a subversive rejection of the values that underlie the hierarchical order (cf. Gould 1988: 4, Kapadia 1995: 166, Zelliott 1996: 26). Such statements are echoed in the everyday conversations of contemporary Dalits who insist that ‘we are all human beings’, or who assert that they are not ‘Hindus’ because they worship in different ways (Appavoo 1986). Time and again they assert their common humanity: “If we are cut do we not bleed? Is our blood not as red as yours?” Old ladies, such as Viramma above, would pose these questions in an indignant rejection of their innate inferiority. Dalits also reject the dichotomy between purity and pollution when they point out that such concerns have never been significant enough to prevent the upper castes from raping Dalit women, beating Dalit men, or (more recently) approaching rich and powerful Dalit individuals for aid.⁴ People are shaped by the culture into which they are born and their perceptions are influenced by it, but they are not merely passive receptacles of the hegemonic value system (Foucault 1980: 98, Guha 1988: 41, Scott 1990: 45, Agarwal 1994: 44, Hirsch & Black 1994: 7-8). Individuals are not only the inert or consenting targets of hegemonic power, as Foucault insists, “they are always

⁴ Freeman (1986: 169) asserts that there is evidence to show that Dalits have desired freedom from oppression for the past 2000 years, but they have lacked the means to express their discontent.

also the elements of its articulation” (1980: 98). Their actions may not be revolutionary but they do register protests against their position in society and seek to improve both their standing within it, and their own self-worth. Even Viramma has not absorbed the notions of karma and dharma to the extent of denying her son an education, although “the Pariah’s dharma” has not traditionally permitted such advancement (Viramma, Racine and Racine 1997, 1998). She may fear the consequences of his radicalism, and may feel obliged to and dependent upon, her landlord, but she is not a slave. She has perhaps sought to find some value in her caste identity through adherence to cultural norms, with a view to a better life in the future. Her actions, however, constitute a denial of the dominant caste belief that the untouchables are incapable of change and improvement. The phrase ‘Pariah’s dharma’ is misleading, therefore, since Viramma clearly believes in an individual’s capacity to affect their own destiny and not that of their caste (Viramma, Racine and Racine 1997: 71, 104, 121). Her son, like the vast majority of India’s Dalit population today, seeks self-respect and dignity within his own lifetime. “Cultural consciousness is equivocal, is ambivalent” (Parish 1996: 204). The appearance of total acceptance or consensus, therefore, would appear to be a methodological artefact (Hall 1988: 54, Scott 1990: 83, Parish 1996: 204).

MODERN MYTHS OF ORIGIN

Deliège insists that there “is no reason to be proud of one’s origins and this shame certainly represents a problem of cultural identity for the Harijans” (1997: 127). This statement is in part self-evidently true, but the decision by academics and Dalit elites to hide their origins cannot wholly be put down to ‘shame’. There are practical, political pressures that require Dalits to hide their caste background in order to get ahead, or to obtain good housing and social regard. There has also been a concerted effort by movement and NGO activists to resurrect the proud history of Dalit activism – which date back to the petitions of 1799 at least - and the distinctive cultural characteristics of the community such as music and dance. The visions of the past which I refer to here, are not the ambiguous ‘myths of origin’ in which Dalits explain the means by which they came to be degraded, rather they are much more political and assertive. In a state that continues to be governed by Dravidian parties, I am

Vincentnathan (1993: 58) quotes an informant who points out that notions of purity and pollution never hinder the upper castes from doing what they want to.

surprised at the prominence that Delière's respondents accord to stories which relate how particular castes came to be seen as untouchable. The 'histories' that were retailed to me are every bit as mythical as these tales of origin, but they are far more explicit in their rejection of the caste system, and of the position of Dalits within it (cf. Rudolphs 1967). The anti-Brahmin movement first popularised the Aryan/Dravidian divide, but Dalits in Tamil Nadu have appropriated this rhetoric to insist that they were the original 'sons-of-the-soil' in the south before the invasion of the Aryans. "When a caste rises socially", Delière notes, "the myths used are more grandiose" (1997: 135). The differences in our findings may perhaps be said to be the difference between two communities. The villagers of Valghira Manikam are struggling to subsist and make ends meet. To antagonise the dominant Kallar caste in this situation would be to jeopardise their security, land tenure, and livelihood. The more assertive Dalits featured in my account are active in social movements that are struggling to forge a new society. Mosse's study of "Harijan" strategies of social mobility found that they do not "generate a new discourse. They are not counter-cultural and do not signify withdrawal from dominant cultural idioms" (1994: 99). Both old and new myths of origin, however, share an ontology that presents all castes as equal and perceives present inequalities as culturally constructed rather than biologically determined.⁵ Whilst Dalit values and beliefs may reflect hegemonic norms in some respects, as Vincentnathan concludes, "their concepts of person and society differ from those of caste Hindus in areas that relate to untouchability and the caste system" (1993: 79).

CASTE IN STONE: MISLEADING TERMINOLOGY

It is misleading here to group the 'upper castes' or 'caste Hindus' together as a coherent and unified social category. On the one hand there is some justification in doing so because it reflects the perception and diction of the Dalits whom I interviewed. On the other hand, at the local level, most Dalits were exceptionally nuanced in their social analysis and usually differentiated between specific castes and sub-castes. The 'higher caste' (*mel jaadi*, *aadhika jaadi*) tag was, in fact, predominantly employed with reference to repressive groups. As such it most frequently referred to a Backward or Most Backward Caste, rather than the upper

⁵ As Parish points out, "dreams of possible worlds" – articulated through myths of origin, songs and narratives that reject the caste hierarchy – "imply possible futures" (1996: 224).

castes per se. The dominant castes in Tamil Nadu tend to emanate from these social groupings partly as a result of the non-Brahmin movement, but also due to the absence of a Kshatriya representative caste in the state. The immediate opponents of the Dalits in Tamil Nadu were the Backward Caste (BC) Thevars (especially the Marava clan) and Kounders, and the Most Backward Caste (MBC) Vanniyars. The Thevars and Vanniyars have formed political associations to protect and advance the interests of their communities, and they are the ones who feel most threatened by the social, political and economic advance of the Dalits (cf. Harriss-White 1997 cited in Jeffrey 2000). To paint members of these castes as homogeneous, however, would be mistaken. In areas where they are a minority such castes also suffer from exploitation, and many members of these castes are very poor or even destitute. Communist party and NGO attempts to forge a class coalition amongst the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and BCs persist although most of my informants felt that they did not adequately reflect the caste concerns of the Dalits. Also, many Backward Caste individuals are committed to a more egalitarian society and were involved in NGOs and other institutions working for the uplift of the Dalits (Beteille 1986, Vincentnathan 1993). The boundaries of caste, however, are rarely transgressed.

Marriages between castes do happen and are increasingly recognised, but they are still frowned upon and they may meet with violent dissent from the higher castes (Chowdhry 1998, Geetha 1998). Caste remains the dominant idiom of social organisation in India, even though its parameters have been significantly altered. As seen in Chapter Two, a steady process of substantialisation has expanded the local basis of the community and transformed the internal organisation of each caste, and caste is now functions more like ethnicity than the traditional system of stratification. Indeed, the polar opposition between the 'pure' Brahmins and the 'impure' Untouchables has lost much of its salience. Brahmins remain influential but they are seldom in direct competition with the Dalits and so there is little enmity between the two communities. Other landed castes resent calls for land reform and higher wages, but Brahmins are often absentee landlords and so any contact is mediated through the intermediate castes. The (M)BC/SC divide, therefore, has become the prime fault-line of caste conflict in Tamil Nadu. The separation between the communities, however, is not hermetic and neither of the opposing blocs represents a homogeneous entity. There is, therefore, room for manoeuvre and negotiation at a local level. In

Kodankipatti (see below) for instance, the Dalits entered into a political alliance with Naidus and other BCs in an attempt to unseat the Kounder panchayat president. Conversely, the Chakkiliyars of Vadianpatti sided with their landlords against the Paraiyar community. The term 'higher caste', therefore, may obscure the complexity of social organisation on the ground, but it is used here to highlight the antagonism felt by the Dalits towards those who perpetuate their subordination. The Dalits I interviewed seldom distinguished between castes that carry out an atrocity and those that merely stand-by. All the 'upper-castes', they would aver, benefit from their suppression.

DOMINATION, DEPENDENCE AND RESISTANCE

"Harijan identity", as Mosse puts it, "is itself principally *defined* by dependence and service (1994: 73). The move from being a 'class in themselves', to a 'class for themselves', therefore is neither an easy nor a straightforward one. "The majority of Dalits living primarily in rural areas", as Nandu Ram says, "have perhaps lacked, since early times, a tradition of well organised and regulated protests or protest movements due to obvious reasons" (1998: 107). These 'obvious reasons' relate to a poverty of resources, economic dependence and the repression of the social system – reasons that are too often downplayed. Time and again, during the course of my fieldwork, violence was unleashed against those Dalits who challenged the dominance of the land-owning castes through words, deeds or gestures. They were murdered, beaten, their houses were burnt, Dalit women were raped, or they were simply subjected to social 'boycott'; they were not provided with jobs, not served in the local shops, and not given access to common resources. There is no reason to consider that the reaction would have been any less repressive in the past, especially as there were no liberal urban centres to flee to, nor were there legal guarantees of their rights (cf. Prakash 1990). The second aspect in the continuing submissiveness on the part of the Dalits is their economic dependence. As the example above highlights, the localised nature of caste as a 'lived' system rendered the untouchables dependent upon the locally dominant caste for work, food, shelter and patronage. Speaking to villagers in the rural districts to the west of Dindugal, one is initially struck by an acute sense of fatalism. With no land of their own they have either to work for the local landlords, walk further to work at the risk of physical harassment, or find employment in the

garment industry. With little prospect of change they are *resigned* to the system, as this following exchange illustrates:

Thangamma: *I work for coolie in the kounder's fields, if I want water then they pour it into my hands, like this... (Cupping her hands she indicated that the water was poured into her palms from on high).*

Hugo: *What? Even today?*

Thangamma: *Yes today – now. This is happening in many villages.*

Edwin: *Can you not take water with you, in a bottle or something?*

Thangamma: *We have to walk 2-3 kilometres to work, if we are carrying spades and everything, then we have to choose between water and a tiffin carrier. If you take a cup or a pot, then they will pour water into it – but you are not allowed to touch their vessels. But if we get angry then what do we do? We will have to go 5-6 km to work. Now also they will sometimes let us take spinach and other vegetables home with us – we would lose all that as well.*

[Discussion in Sakaravalasu: 19/10/99]

Thangamma is in her mid fifties, both she and her husband have been agricultural labourers all of their lives. The resignation that is evident in the quote above is somewhat deceptive however. Despite continuing to till the fields, they have built a relatively large and comfortable home for themselves and educated their children through school and college. It is not a poverty of ambition that they suffer from, but the lack of resources. 'They have all the land, what can we do?' – was a frequent complaint. The logic is compelling. In this area, it has meant that many of the Dalits continue to perform the demeaning jobs demanded of their caste. These tasks are called *adimai thozhil* in Tamil. It is an instructive phrase literally meaning 'slave work'. Drawing upon Bharadwaj (1974) and Bhaduri (1983), Corbridge & Harriss observe that the poor "are frequently 'compulsively involved' in markets in circumstances of 'forced commerce' (2000: 84). Performing such work out of

compulsion should not be mistaken as showing that the untouchables are in consensus with the values of the hierarchical caste system. Even in the situation above, the Dalits whom I spoke to were keen to maintain their dignity. 'Slave tasks' were now performed for cash, albeit less than an outside group would get, which is deemed to be less polluting (Mosse 1994: 86), and certainly less undignified. Other initiatives also indicated the desire to be treated as human beings. Anandraj had opened a small shop in the front room of his house. The store had very little by way of stock in it, but it served a symbolic purpose more than an economic one. "I opened a small shop here", he explained, "because the Chettiar shop near the bus stop would not serve our children properly. If they asked for sweets, they would be poured into their hands from a distance so that half of them fell on the floor" (Interview 19/10/99). Anandraj had managed to set up the shop from the earnings he gained in a local power loom; others were not able to escape dependency so easily. Indeed, Anandraj himself said that pressure was being put on the mill owners to sack him because he had 'two jobs'. Even such localised and insignificant a piece of 'resistance' is sufficient to challenge the hegemony of the dominant caste and to let it go unpunished would be to set a dangerous precedent. In Robinson's telling phrase: "What the landlords most fear is a population without fear" (1988: 259).

THE WEAPONS OF THE POWERFUL

Such insignificant challenges to the dominant system, as Scott (1985, 1990) has so admirably shown, constitute the shared understandings and values that are drawn upon in times of more overt struggle. "The hidden nature of much resistance", Scott points out, "is conditioned by fear and coercion. Lacking any realistic possibility, for the time being, of directly and collectively redressing their situation, the village poor have little choice but to adjust" (1985: 246). From this perspective the institution of a democratic state in India has extended the autonomous spaces and rights to subordinate groups that have enabled them to communicate and co-ordinate their common grievances and plans for action (Robinson 1988: 259, Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998: 14, 263). The villagers of Sakaravalasu, as well as those of Delière's study, remain subject to structures of caste dominance in ways that preclude joint action. The higher castes in such areas control much of the power and resources that are available and are more organised as a group than the Dalit community. Even where the Dalits have ceased to be economically dependent upon the higher castes by

virtue of a job in a nearby town, or through investing in a handloom, they are constantly brought up against the power of the dominant castes. Caste Hindus tend to be better placed in administrative authorities, local politics and the police. Whether they want to apply for a government loan or scheme, to set up a shop in the village, to gain a recommendation for a college place, or to install electric lights and paved roads in their part of a village, therefore, the Dalits are forced to turn to them (Harriss-White 1997 in Jeffrey 2000).⁶

A recurrent complaint of Dalits anywhere is of the corruption and extortion of the locally dominant castes. The predominance of the higher castes in the offices of administrative authority grants them influence over the distribution of public resources and finances. The Dalits of Vadianpatti (see below) accuse the higher castes of bribing officials not to give the Dalits the title deeds to their land, because “if they have a good life they will cease to respect us” (20/03/99). In SMP Colony, a Dalit housing board in Madurai, the young people recall how higher caste money-lenders used to “come to reclaim debts in the husbands’ absence and try and force themselves on the wives” (23/03/99). More frequent complaints refer to the corruption of those high caste officials or educated people who act as mediators between the Dalits and the state. Poorly educated or illiterate Dalits often turn to a big man or patron for assistance in obtaining a government loan or securing compensation (de Wit 1996: 17, Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 202).⁷ In doing so they place great trust in ‘benefactors’, but this trust is often betrayed. The story of Pandiamma is typical. She is a widow from Sivarakottai village situated 40 km to the south east of Madurai.

⁶ As one of the young lads from Melavalavu put it: “If you go for a pee anywhere round here it is on higher caste lands”. The context was a discussion in which movement activists from Madurai were berating the village youth for their ‘cowardice’. “It is easy for you to say that”, they responded, “you can come and go as you like. But we live here”. Implicit in this statement is a recognition that the higher castes do not necessarily differentiate between ‘innocent’ and ‘guilty’ Dalits, usually the whole ‘cheri’ is made to suffer for the ‘effrontery’ of one or more of its members. “If you come and stay here for two days, you too will acquire a slave instinct”, one of the lads insisted, “how can one change character immediately?” (25/03/99 – I was largely an interested spectator in this exchange between village youth and Liberation Panther activists). Shanti, a Dalit woman from Kodankipatti, explained the necessity of being on good terms with the higher castes. “I can’t even pawn my gold to get some money when I am in debt”, she said. “We have to go to ... places where they ask a thousand questions about who I am and so on” (22/03/99).

⁷ “Many voters”, as Corbridge and Harriss put it, “are not able to speak directly to ‘government’” (2000: 202).

Pandiamma: My husband's name was Alagar. He passed away. I have four or five children. With these kids I have to provide food by labouring. There is no other work, no other way or amenity. It is three years since he died and I have spent Rs. 1000 trying to collect a pension. ... I went to the Panchayat office where the money was supposed to have gone. There was the form with my photo and all. They got me to sign it, and that was it...

Vairamani: When you went along, did you not take anyone with you, an educated person?

Pandiamma: No.

Vairamani: Right, well that's it. They will have eaten your money. You have given your signature to say that you have received the money, and they will have shared it out.

[Interview 03/04/99].⁸

More commonly, the officials are said to have siphoned off a considerable 'commission' from any loan or grant that they receive. The poorer Backward Castes in rural areas proffered similar complaints about the corruption of officials (Lingyapatti 21/03/99). Lack of education is often a hindrance for the poor. As in the case of Pandiamma, many people are unaware of what they are signing exactly, and are eager to get their hands on the much-needed source of income. The preponderant influence of the higher castes in such offices certainly makes it more difficult for the Dalits to stand up for their dues. There is also a widespread perception that the Dalits are ignorant, disorganised and gullible, therefore easy to defraud. Movements provide a useful service in providing educated members who can fill in documents, read the small print and chase up an application (cf. Sebastian 1994: 210). Corruption and bureaucratic red tape are merely an extension of more prevalent and persistent indignities. The ration shop, bus stop and tea stalls are usually located in the main

⁸ Vairamani is a member of the dominant Thevar caste in Sivarakottai. He agreed to accompany me and introduce me to the Dalits in the village due to his own particular history. He fell in love with and

oor. These conveniences are also manned and run by higher caste people. "There is a ration shop in our area", the women of Keelathurai (a residential area in the heart of Madurai) complained to me, "but they (the higher castes) pour kerosene for all their lot first". Furthermore, there is a rule that "coolie workers are supposed to get 10 litres of kerosene, but they only pour out seven litres and sell off the rest to others" (28/03/99). Such irritants are ongoing aspects of daily life, but it would be false to present them as problems specific to the Dalit community.⁹ Where one community is pitted against another, however, or in villages where Dalits have traditionally been dependent upon the higher castes, such minor problems can easily escalate into conflict.

VICTIMISATION: UNITY AND DIVISION AMONGST THE DALITS

Vadianpatti is a small village located 20km to the south west of Madurai. The Paraiyars in this village have been subject to a social boycott since they established a Liberation Panther (DPI) association here, and built a meeting hall for the organisation. The boycott has meant that the men are unable to find employment in the vicinity and have to travel elsewhere for work, they are also prevented from using the common Village Square, and have been unable to get their hair cut in the area. The local leaders of the DPI were away in another district where they were helping to harvest sugarcane. Those present, therefore, were peripheral to the movement and at times critical of it. Most of them were daily labourers in Madurai where they were predominantly employed as construction labourers. "In this village", Guru stated, "with all this hassle we have yet to gain independence". Chandran agreed with this assessment. "We can't wear shoes in the village or go anywhere with peace of mind. If we wear shoes they say 'look at him, he thinks he is a big man now'. 'Pallan', they call us, or 'Paraiyan'".¹⁰ There is a bench at the bus stop, but if we go to sit down there they will not let us. If we sit down despite this, then they beat us. Be slaves, or be hit (*adimai illate adi*) there is no other option" (20/03/99). The price of protest is high for these villagers, but they are no longer prepared to accept the subordination

married a Dalit girl from a nearby village. The abuse and threats that he has subsequently received have made him more sympathetic to the plight of the Dalits in his home village.

⁹ The prevalence of such forms of pilfering and official obstructionism was highlighted towards the end of 1999, when the hit film *Muthalvan* (The Premier) featured a tale in which a social activist becomes the Chief Minister and puts things to rights.

¹⁰ The suffix '-an', rather than '-ar' in the names Pallar or Paraiyar is a more derogatory and disrespectful usage and would never be used between equals.

that they have put up with for so long. Not everyone can afford to travel further and further afield to find work, however, and not everyone can so easily sever ties with the higher castes. Bonds of debt, tradition, and inertia still connect some Dalits to the higher castes.

Consequently, not all the Dalits in Vadianpatti are deprived of employment. Several families from the Chakkiliyar community continue to work for the higher castes, and to corroborate the higher caste accounts in legal disputes.¹¹ When asked why they had not taken out a case under the Protection of Civil Rights act, the Dalits replied that several of their community would come forward to testify that: “What these people is doing is wrong and false”, and that “only what *Aiya* (sir) is doing is correct”. “People like them”, Chandran says, “they call for work, but people like us they refuse to employ”. For the ‘losers’ of Scott’s (1985) study, for “those who call out ‘*Thalaivar*’, *Aiya*, *Sami* with bowed heads, those who take their towels off their shoulders and tie it round their waists to say ‘*Vanakum Aiya*’ – there is work available” (20/03/99).¹² My friends and the villagers affiliated to the Liberation Panthers refer to such people as ‘traitors’ to their community. In many ways they are, but the compulsions of poverty, a lack of resources and physical fear should not be underestimated. “The Harijans”, according to Delière, “are afraid. They will never fight back in case of problems with the high castes” (1997: 158). It is doubtful whether this statement was ever wholly true, and it is patently false today, but it serves to highlight the very real perils of Dalit assertion.

Kappalur is a satellite village of Madurai. It is only 30 minutes away by bus, and is even closer to the big cotton mills that provide most of the employment for the unskilled labourers of the area. I visited this village with members of the Liberation Panthers and was taken through the *oor* (or main village) to the Dalit quarters, or *cheri*. The Dalits here had many problems, most of which were related to poverty and the conditions in which they resided. We were repeatedly told that there were no caste problems in the village, that they were allowed into the temple, and that the two-glass

¹¹ Pai (2001) provides similar accounts from the state of Uttar Pradesh.

¹² Chandran continues; “If you say the Dalits should remain as slaves then they will call you a hundred times. Then you have to go and stand behind their house if they call you, you must not go to the front of the house. Even if they have sent someone to call for you, you have to stand behind them and call

system was not in evidence. On the way back to the bus-stop, however, one of the Dalits told us that we had not had the whole picture, and that we should meet Alagar Sami who was affiliated to the DPI. The account that he provided differed markedly from that of the others.

Alagar: If they die then we must beat the drum, and prepare the body. We have to beat drums at the temple for eight days. Only for such duties are we allowed into the oor.

Hugo: Do they pay you for this?

Alagar: Salary? They give us a salary that doesn't pay. If we refuse to perform these tasks, then they bar us from entering the temple or from coming anywhere near the temple. ... It is twenty-five years since we went into the temple to worship God.

Hugo: Is this all the Dalit people?

Alagar: We are some 15 houses – that is, Paraiyars are some 15 houses. They don't let any of us into the temple because we refuse to do any of the slave work.

[Interviewed 29/03/99]

KODANKIPATTI: VULNERABILITY AND VIOLENCE

Social exclusion from the *oor* or from the temple (see Chapter 5) and the imposition of a social boycott are the most frequent sanctions that the higher castes resort to. Lest the Dalits of Vadianpatti become too bold or gain too many ideas 'above their station', however, there are always examples of more severe retribution elsewhere. Kodankipatti is a village six kilometres down the road from Vadianpatti. For ten years the Dalits here have been refused employment because they stopped doing the slave tasks that were demanded of them. The example of Kodankipatti highlights the extreme vulnerability of the Dalit *cheris*. The Dalits here are an impoverished

out 'Aiya' after them" (20/03/99). "Appearances are important" as Bourdieu states, "the concessions of politeness always contain political concessions" (in Scott 1985:283).

minority. The higher castes are not only dominant in terms of land and finances, but they control access to vital resources such as the common lands, the village shops and the open square. The houses of rural Dalits rarely have bathroom or toilet facilities, and they depend upon access to the common lands (*poramboke*) around the village and the local pond (*kanmai*) for these purposes. "If we womenfolk go there they tease and taunt us", Puliymammal said. "We are left with only this colony". Ten years ago this continual friction was translated into violence. The higher castes of the village burst into the *cheri*, beat the men and women and children and set fire to their huts. "Run you ('*Wodu de*': *De* is the impolite, vulgar form of 'you')", they are reported to have said, "we will drive you out. This is our place and we will rule it". Several of the Dalits bore scars of injuries that they had sustained in their frantic flight. The government at the time had conducted peace meetings, rebuilt the houses this time with tiled roofs and persuaded the Dalits to return, but the peace was fragile. When I visited them they were terrified of further violence, due to a confrontation over the right to common space in the village.

"Recently what happened was that we worshipped the God (*Sami*)", Lakshmi recounted. "Having anointed the God we thought, 'OK, we will all of us together show a film in the common square (*Pothu Manthai*)'. So we collected and saved up cash amongst the ten of us to show this film. But when we ran the film then they said 'Oi! This place is not open to you, your area is the colony', and they chased us off" (20/03/99). The police when they arrived upheld the complaint of the upper castes by insisting that the Dalits should have sought permission to run a film in the common area. The next week the Dalits complained about the weekly market saying that they had not been consulted. When they threatened to disrupt the market stalls "about a hundred police came here". "SC peoples", Shanti sardonically observed, "do not even have the value of vegetables". Like most rural Dalits, those at Kodankipatti accuse the higher castes of appropriating the produce and income from the common village lands to create a 'village fund'. "They use this money to make their own laws (*Kattu padu*)", Shanti continued. "That is not government. They keep it for themselves. In this way even if they killed one of us downtrodden (*Tazhtapattoor*) ones, they would use that money to save themselves" (20/03/99). The Panchayat President of Kodankipatti dismisses such talk as nonsense. "They have some sort of inferiority complex", he said, "they think of themselves as depressed. Now if we are going to

worship God, then any money raised is used for this” (21/03/99). When confronted with this assertion Laxmanan, who works as a forest ranger, replied “he is running a little kingdom of his own” (21/03/99).

The fears and anxiety of the Dalits in Kodankipatti were sickeningly prescient, as was revealed merely three months after this interview. Early on the morning of the 20th of June the higher caste residents of the village stormed into the Dalit colony and ransacked their houses as the Dalits fled in terror. 24 houses were smashed up or set alight, belongings and tiles lay strewn across the floors. The Dalit inhabitants had walked down the road, and had taken asylum 6km away in the DPI stronghold of Muduvarpatti. Here they were crowded into a half-constructed marriage hall in cramped and dirty conditions. “We can never return” they told me, and they pressed the government to provide them with alternative accommodation closer to the village where they now resided (cf. Dinakaran 21/06/99, Hindu 07/07/99). “We only want to live”, Balasundaram said at a day-long protest to publicise the issue, “but they do not see us as human there” (13/07/99). The point that rankled most was the persistent inaction of the law-enforcement authorities. “We have been to see every official”, they told me, “now we are looking to you for help” (09/07/99). Thirumavalavan, the leader of the DPI, called on the Chief Minister to resign. “Why did the higher castes set light to their houses? The downtrodden want rights to walk on common paths, they want rights to common assets, they want rights to the lands which are leased out every year. Because they asked for these rights ten years ago, forty houses were razed to ashes. Had Karunanidhi taken proper, orderly, thorough action then, would this attack have taken place today?” (Speech 13/07/99).¹³

VIOLENCE, VALOUR AND COUNTER-VIOLENCE

“The major kind of violence today”, according to Mendelsohn and Vicziany, “is visited on the Dalits due to their resistance to subordination and claims to social respect, high wages and land” (SOAS Seminar, London: 01/12/99). They see this violence as qualitatively different from that of the past. What have come to be known as ‘Harijan atrocities’ are incidences of high caste retaliation against the perceived

¹³ Dalit movements often portray their actions as necessitated by the inaction of the state. Much of their work is involved in putting pressure on the state, and especially the police, to enforce the laws that are already in existence.

insolence of Dalit individuals. They “often follow a line of extravagant revenge out of all proportion to the initial incident” (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998: 53, Jeffrey 2000). Events in Tamil Nadu have often followed this pattern of escalation. Dalits have been beaten, raped and killed for petty ‘misdemeanours’ such as wearing chappals or trousers through the *oor*, for brushing against a high caste person in the cinema, or for demanding a share of the common resources of the village. Given the ever-present threat of violence and the regularity with which that threat is violently visited upon the bodies and belongings of the Dalits in Tamil Nadu, we can perhaps understand Gough’s insistence that the Pallars of Tanjore show a “fanatical insistence on equality” (1960: 44). “If we thought that mere existence was more important than honour (*maanam*)”, the Dalits in Vadianpatti observed, “then we would have joined the higher caste side as well ... If we live but for a day it should be with honour” (20/03/99). The sentiment is surprising from a community that is living from day to day on subsistence wages and in constant fear of alienating the higher castes.¹⁴ The temptation is to dismiss it as a rhetorical flourish. “The DPI talk boldly” a member of TTS told me, “but they won’t *do* anything”. In a social environment where non-compliance has rendered the Dalits of Kodankipatti refugees within their own land, however, *not doing* what is expected of you requires equal courage. “What you need is resistance”, Palani Kumar of the DPI told the Dalits of Kodankipatti, “the strength to resist. One must resolve not to live in fear but to fight back even if that means dying” (21/03/99).

This rhetoric of honour and heroism is not unique to the Dalits in Tamil Nadu. Dickey rightly notes that, “there is a particular intensity of following, a depth of devotion, felt for leaders perceived to be ‘heroes’” (1993: 351). As we shall see in chapter seven, heroic figures in Tamil Nadu are portrayed as altruistic and virtuous, seeking to benefit others than themselves. The archetypal hero figure in recent Tamil politics has been M.G. Ramachandran, the AIADMK Chief Minister for ten years between 1977 and 1987. Through his film career, and careful orchestrated acts of state and personal charity, MGR cultivated an image of a heroic figure and was almost seen as a deity. The Dalits of Deliège’s (1997) study have no pride in their origin and seek as far as

¹⁴ “The poorest, most socially disorganised, and most politically powerless strata in every society tend to avoid participation in movements despite daily indignities and deprivations. The costs are too great for those who already have little economic security and political protection” (Zirakzadeh 1997: 11).

possible to shroud their antecedents. By contrast Dalit movement activists are proud to call themselves by their caste names, and emphasise the cultural differences between them and the caste Hindus. It is perhaps the recognition that some Dalits are ashamed, however, that has led the Dalit movement to emphasise the heroism of past leaders and martyrs to the cause. This process has been attended by simultaneous moves by Dalit institutions and non-governmental organisations to 'rediscover' the wealth of Dalit arts and culture. This process is a direct rebuttal of the common assertion that Dalits do not have a separate sub-culture. The political movement emphasis, however, has been upon the heroism of leaders rather than the distinctive aspects of Dalit culture. By praising the selfless heroism of those who have given their lives, the movements are able to counter the very real fears of their potential constituents.

MURDERS, MARTYRS AND MOBILISATION

"Social movements are not only a set of beliefs, actions and actors", as Fine insists, "but also a 'bundle of stories'. Movement allegiance depends upon personal accounts showing similar experiences and feelings" (1995: 134). The 'story' of Melavalavu is known to all Tamil Dalit activists, for whom it has become a 'chosen trauma'; an event which encapsulates their grievances and demands (Kakar 1996: 50).¹⁵ The premeditated massacre of the Panchayat President Murugesan and five of his followers would, in 'rational actor' terms, be expected to deter potential members from joining. The murders, however, served to convince many of the need to protest against such injustice. Melavalavu has become a 'condensed symbol' of the necessity to struggle and protest, and the importance of honour in life or in death (Turner 1967: 29). In the memorial rites that have taken place by the graves of the fallen on the

¹⁵ The term 'chosen trauma' is particularly apt in this instance where the movements have so many cases of higher caste aggression to highlight. 'Chosen traumas' do not only emphasise the significance of an event, they also reflect the concerns of the movement in question. In Tamil Nadu the massacre of 44 labourers in the village of Kilvenmani in 1969, is articulated by movements to evoke a sense of strength and the capacity for retaliation. When the main accused in that case was released from prison 14 years later he was waylaid by Marxist-Leninists and hacked into 44 pieces. The massacre at Melavalavu has become especially pertinent now as it points out the way that Dalits are prevented from participating as equals in the democratic process. As the Dalit Panthers have entered the political arena, Melavalavu has encapsulate the Dalit struggle for a more democratic society. The term 'chosen trauma' is also apposite in the sense that different movements can highlight different incidents. On the anniversary of the Nellai massacre in 2001, therefore, Puthiya Tamilagam activists processed to the banks of the river Tamiraparani and laid wreaths and made speeches. They called for the construction of a memorial on the site and raised the Manjola dispute into the public arena again (Hindu: "PT

anniversary of their deaths, Murugesan is depicted as the heroic figure who should be emulated. This comes out clearly in the rousing speech given by the Liberation Panther's leader on the occasion of the second anniversary in 1999:

One thing all of you need to remember is that Melavalavu panchayat is a reserved seat for the downtrodden. Only a downtrodden person may compete for it. Hearing this news the high caste fanatics asked: "Can a Paraiyan sit on the seat of our panchayat office? There may be a Paraiyan as the President of this Republic, but we will not permit a Paraiyan to become our panchayat president." So saying the fanatics held a panchayat meeting where they called on all candidates to fall at the feet of the leaders and vow not to compete. "If you do compete we will behead you", they threatened. Even after such threats and scare-mongering for the sole objective of protecting the government-given rights to reservation, and to make them a reality Murugesan did not bow to the pressure or the threats. "Even if my head rolls, we will protect these political rights" he said, and competed in the government elections did Melavalavu Murugesan. That alone is true bravery! He did not compete unawares or in ignorance, he knew what would happen. ... There can be no Dalits, politicians, or those studying about the Dalits who have not heard about Murugesan and his brave comrades. Do any people know about those who murdered him? Will applause for Murugesan's killers have flown around the world? Apart from accounts of their cowardice, none can speak of them as heroic figures. Therefore there is no need for great distress or tears, in this land caste fanatics have murdered people without number. ... No matter how many places have witnessed murders, bloodshed or decapitation, until our rights have been attained, until we gain our liberation, this race will continue fighting, this downtrodden race."

[Thirumavalavan 30/06/99].¹⁶

threatens militant struggle". By Syed Muthahar, July 30, 2001). See Appendix and later chapters for details of the Nellai massacre.

¹⁶ The word that I have translated as race here 'inam', is an ambiguous one. In various contexts it can mean race, caste or ethnicity. I have used race here since caste is clearly inadequate a term to encapsulate all those incorporated in the term 'downtrodden'. Race has been preferred to 'ethnicity' in

The themes of honour, courage, and the ultimate triumph of heroic virtue over evil are inescapable in this speech. Which Dalits who listened to such sentiments could remain unstirred? The fallen heroes, it is asserted, will have honour in death, whereas the cowardly villains will be erased from the records of history. “Those with no interest in people’s liberty leave no trace after their death”, Cinthanai Selvam, the assistant General Secretary of the DPI, emphasised. “Liberation Panthers have no fear of this, if we die in the cause of our people we will remain in the hearts of our comrades” (30/06/99). History awaits those who can lose their chains, people were told, and there is also a reassurance that their efforts will not go unmarked or in vain. The construction of a collective and heroic ‘we’ serves to lend courage to the villagers who are on the front line of this struggle as was evident in an interview with the youths of Melavalavu. Accused of being lily-livered they retorted that they were more than prepared to exact revenge for the killings if they received encouragement and support from the movement (Discussion 25/03/99). Whilst people may be moved by such sentiments intangible benefits are probably insufficient to induce most people to adopt similar courses of action. “It’s all very well saying ‘attack them, attack them’”, as one of the unemployed youths of Melavalavu put it, “but we need resources and money to execute such a task” (ibid). The existence of official paths for individual mobility also serves to cast activism as an unnecessary and risky business (Vincentnathan 1993: 58). Most of the speeches, as a consequence, devoted time to demand that the government provide adequate compensation to the bereaved, and security to the current panchayat president. It would, however, be wrong to underestimate the powerful sentiments unleashed in the praise of martyrs and heroes. It places the individuals facing potential violence into a historical perspective and struggle. These great leaders fought and died for the liberation of the Dalit people, we are told. “Even if we do not have freedom”, the ‘Martyr’ Immanuel Sekhar is reported to have said, “we should stand up with valour for our rights” (Interview with Chandra Bose: 23/02/99).

part because of the history of Dravidianism in Tamil Nadu which often emphasised the racial differences between the ‘Aryan’ Brahmins and the ‘Dravidian’ Tamils. I do not intend to suggest that

LIVING IN GLASS HOUSES: Dalit Violence as Counter-productive

The emotive content of such perorations, and the glorification of fallen heroes, has been seen by some as too effective a tool of mobilisation. Both Dalits and the state blame the passion and barely muted aggression of the speeches for inciting violence, and for alienating the institutions of interest mediation. Shri Rangan Prakash, the State leader of a Republican Party of India (RPI) faction, blames the incendiary speeches of the Liberation Panthers for inciting frustrated Dalit youth into acts of violent protest that transgress the laws of the land. Murugan, an agricultural labourer who used to be a DPI member, highlighted the difficulties associated with this sort of extra-legal protest. "I was a member of that movement", he recounted, "I cannot now receive any government benefits or assistance, because I am an offender" (27/04/99). Those with criminal convictions are not entitled to the government provisions that are ear-marked for the Scheduled Castes. If this trend was to continue, according to Shri Rangan Prakash, "then in ten years or so many of our youth will suffer, they will all become terrorists" (27/04/99). The focus of the Dalit movements should be upon the economic and educational uplift of the community, according to these two analysts. Any form of protest or mobilisation that hinders the social advance of the community is to be rejected.

Many leaders adopt a moderate line that emphasises the necessity of remaining within the law. They argue that it is the Dalits themselves who are the real losers in any escalation of violence. The other caste communities and the state are better organised, and have access to more resources and means of oppression. Not only would Dalits lose out on the benefits offered by the liberal state, therefore, they would also constitute the main victims of violence. Those living in glass houses, as the state secretary (SC/ST) of the BJP, Palinivelu Swamy, asserted, should not be the first to throw stones. "If we hit back at them", he continued, "we do not have the finances, we do not have educated lawyers or money to get bail" (10/04/99). Shri Rangan Prakash directed my attention to the numbers of Dalit youth currently in jail. It is the responsibility of the movement to stand by them and get them out, he insisted. The DPI also recognise this sense of responsibility, and frequently campaign for the release of their cadres, but the reputation of the organisation for violence has made it

the Dalits constitute a separate race from other castes, and nor would most movement members, it is a rhetorical flourish in this sense, rather than a descriptive or analytical category.

increasingly difficult for them to negotiate with the authorities. 'The police are running scared of a Dalit organisation for the first time', is their proud boast, but this has led to rising levels of repression targeting movement members. The moderate leaders perceive the DPI to be at least partly responsible for this state of affairs. They highlight the way in which the violence of the movement's rhetoric and of some of the DPI protests is used to legitimise the institution of draconian laws and preventative arrests. Rather than engage in a futile conflict with the state, such leaders urged, the DPI should organise a political force that can raise the issues of their members in the Assembly.¹⁷

NON-VIOLENCE, VIOLENCE AND EMANCIPATION

The spaces for reform and protest that are offered by the liberal democratic state make such an argument difficult to ignore. The Indian State not only allows for the free formation of associations and political parties, but also provides reservations, quotas and welfare schemes to the Dalit community. Engaging in violence, therefore, is seen as unnecessary, costly, and counter-productive. Simultaneously, however, no Dalit leader can afford to ignore the real frustration and anger of the Dalit youth who are not prepared to tolerate the incredibly slow changes in their social position. The benefits are welcome, but they are perceived to be a façade for continuing inaction. The government, by persistently refusing to publish the findings of a White Paper on the reservations situation, merely fuels speculation that many of the schemes do not reach their intended targets (cf. Sebastian 1994: 209). Reservation quotas are constantly attacked by upper castes who demand that merit be the sole criterion of any appointments. Though the reality on the ground is that many of the places supposedly set aside for the Dalits remain unfilled, the *perception* that the State is pandering to the Dalits, has been sufficient to increase the numbers of attacks against Dalits.¹⁸ N.V.Jayaseelan, the State General Secretary of the RPI (Gawai) is a Buddhist who insists on the need for a non-violent approach. Yet when he was pressed on the rising levels of violence against the Dalits he was adamant that "we are not like Jesus Christ who said if they hit you on the one cheek than you should turn the other. ... How

¹⁷ "The place to raise our grievances and opinions", according to Shri Rangan Prakash, "is the Parliament or the Assembly" (27/04/99).

¹⁸ Vincentnathan (1996), Alm (1996), Deliège (1997), and Jeffrey (2000) provide more examples of this trend.

many blows can I remain patient for? If I do not hit back, will the people behind me give me any respect?" (Interview: 26/04/99).

Dalit movements argue that they are anxious to remain within the law, but that the State and the higher caste communities do not want to see the Constitution enforced. Every demonstration contains a demand that the State enforce the law – be it the Prevention of Atrocities Act, the Untouchability Offences Act, the Protection of Civil Rights Act, or even the standard Criminal Justice Act. "I do not wish for rivers of blood to flow", Y.Balasundaram, the moderate Dalit statesman, warned the state authorities at Melavalavu, "but you are creating a situation where violence against our people goes unpunished" (30/06/99). In such a scenario the impulse to take the law into their own hands merges with increasing disillusionment to create a volatile situation. "Many people are asking us why we have not revenged these killings", Tada (a nickname derived from his imprisonment under the Terrorism and Disruptive Activities prevention Act) Periyasami of the DPI admitted (30/06/99). There is a half-hearted assertion of the belief that violence can act as the 'midwife' of liberty. Caste, to paraphrase Fanon, "is violence, political, military, cultural and psychic; only a counter violence operating in the same spheres can eradicate it" (Caute 1970: 81).¹⁹ "It is only because people are prepared and ready to hit back", as D'Souza of the Tamilian Republican Party asserts, "that we have attained a degree of respect and dignity" (17/01/99). "At the level of individuals", as Fanon observed, "violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction" (1967: 74).

AGGRESSION AND ASSERTION: A HIT FOR A HIT

The aggression implicit in the popular slogan of 'a hit for a hit' has been seen as responsible for much of the escalation in anti-Dalit violence. In areas of high caste domination and oppression, the very slogan can cause resentment because it asserts

¹⁹ The comparison with colonialism is not perhaps as inapt as it might seem, it is often asserted that India may be independent but that the Dalits have yet to gain their liberty. The Dalit movements also frequently made reference to the example of South Africa. At a flag-raising ceremony in Emmeneswaram Thirumavalavan assured the gathered activists: "I am prepared to spend however many years in jail for the sake of these people. Nelson Mandela, for the people of South Africa, for the Black people's freedom, spent 26 years in prison. Yet he emerged with the same courage, with increased valour to gain the freedom of the people and to seize the reins of power. Having seen and experienced this the prison cells can hold no fear for us anymore. A cell; the den where a Panther takes rest" (18/07/99).

the Dalit demand to be seen as equals. Mathivanan of the Working Peasant's Movement disapproved of the Liberation Panther's tactics, but he denied that they were a violent organisation. "That is", he explained, "they are hitting me and I am defending myself. Do I not even have such human rights? Do I have rights to defend myself from attacks or not?" (Interview 28/09/99). The inaction of the State authorities is the most commonly cited reason for the turn to violent protest. If the government did its job, they argue, then there would be no need for these movements to exist at all. The State's propensity to turn a blind eye to acts of higher caste aggression is believed to be one of the main causes for the continuing incidences of caste violence. A familiar rhetorical trope was to point out that if those setting light to a *cheri*, or the perpetrators of innumerable massacres were tried, sentenced and imprisoned, then they would not be able to re-offend. An unintended offshoot of the rise in social tension, has been an increase in Dalit consciousness. Those who would normally be unwilling to see themselves as part of a community, are being defined and targeted as such by others. "If another hundred or so people die, if another 1000 huts are razed to the ground – well let them", Ravichandran of the Marutham Network insisted. "Due to this our people are starting to think about who our friends and enemies are, they are starting to identify themselves are they not? ... In every village now, people have started to resist" (27/09/99). The popularity of the Liberation Panthers, he asserts, rests on their ability to fight back and to protect people from caste based violence.

When the villagers of Kodankipatti fled in fear of the higher caste mob, they were able to take refuge in the DPI stronghold of Muduvarpatti. When this village was in turn subject to attack by the local higher castes they were repelled by men and women who refused to run. In such situations the impact of the violence is more profound than the immediate tally of the number of people who have died, the cost of the damaged goods, or the extent of the injuries on both sides. The riots in Ramnathapuram during October 1998 saw scores of houses burned to the ground, hundreds of people rendered homeless and eleven people killed. S.Viswanathan (1998: 36) described it as a "black day" for the people, but many Dalits cast it in a different light. They cited the fact that five of the victims were from Backward Castes (BC) as an indication that the Dalits would no longer give in to violence. "We are no longer slaves", Professor Gnanasekaran, a Social Historian from Neyveli University,

told a meeting to recall the Dalit martyr Immanuel Sekhar (Dalit Resource Centre Seminar, T.T.S: 17/09/99).²⁰ The assertion is that the BCs will think twice before attacking a Dalit community in the future, and yet the claim rings hollow. “All the victims”, as Viswanathan observed, “were from among the economically weaker sections”, and he suggests that political machinations lie at the roots of the disturbances (Frontline 1998: 36). This fact highlights the weakness of a strategy of violence. The primary victims of violent caste conflict are the marginalised poor. Fighting back may enhance the dignity of the oppressed, but unless it is merely one part of a concerted programme it cannot put food in the stomachs of the hungry, or provide work for the unemployed. Thirumavalavan was keen to dismiss the image of the DPI as a violent organisation:

Were we perpetrators of violence, how many days would it have taken us to counter attack in Kodankipatti? Are we unable to muster five hundred people? Can we not march to Kodankipatti? Could we not attack the caste fanatics? Could we not wipe out their assets? Of course! But, we do not believe in violence. Time and again we have placed our faith in this government; we have asked them to process our demands. This displays the faith that we still have in this Republic.

[Thirumavalavan 13/07/99].

EDUCATE, AGITATE, ORGANISE

‘Tell a slave that he is a slave and he will revolt’, the Dalit movements often quote Ambedkar as saying. The rising consciousness and assertion of the Dalit people in Tamil Nadu marks a determination to resist the indignities that they have suffered for so long. The Dalits on their own cannot transform society through violent struggle, as we have seen in the villages of Somankottai and Sakaravalasu, where they are a dependent minority. The inequality of these social structures cannot be altered overnight, or by returning a hit for a hit. The Dalit movements recognise the need to campaign on issues other than the immediate security of their members. The need for

²⁰ Dr S. Kambamanikam of TTS has studied psychology as well as Theology. An element of violence is necessary to raise the consciousness of the oppressed he asserts. For it is only through such assertion that they can realise their humanity. Such action, he states, cannot really be seen as violence: “A hit for a hit, an eye for an eye, is the slogan. But is this violence or justice? For so long the oppressed have tried peaceful means, this is a very last resort” (1/10/99).

land, education and financial security are paramount, but in the process of achieving greater equality in these fields it is likely that the caste Hindu oppression will become even more severe. Under threat of violence or the withdrawal of caste Hindu support we have seen that the fissiparous Dalit community may be even further sub-divided and set against themselves. "Violence on a national scale liquidates tribalism and regionalism, while binding the community together and committing each individual in the eyes of themselves and of others", according to Fanon (Caute 1970: 84). If this is the case then the occasional and limited resort to violence, by Dalit movements who are trying to assert their humanity, may be said to advance a search for justice. By hitting back against the upper castes, Dalit movements affirm that they too are human beings. Violence alone, however, cannot provide a solution. It also alienates the State, which casts them as militants or terrorists. Ambedkar exhorted his followers to 'educate, agitate, organise'. Dalit movements have often been guilty of organising themselves in order to agitate rather than to provide coherent support networks for marginalised Dalits.²¹ This chapter has sought to place Dalit activism in context and to chart the problems that beset protest. The threat of violence, as we have seen, is ever present and its manifestation is too frequent to ignore. In these circumstances the risks of mobilisation and assertion are so great that the temptation is either to 'free ride' on the efforts of others, or to engage in counter acts of violence. As we have seen, the Dalits are often dependent labourers who are too scared of violence or hunger to resist. In the next chapter we discuss the economic context of Dalit action and the material and structural alterations that have accorded the Dalits the means with which to organise on a sustained basis. Tada Periyasami, the General Secretary of the Liberation Panthers, was jailed for five years under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which might have been expected to fuel his radicalism. Rather, it seems to have convinced him of the opposite. "Mustering four people and exacting revenge upon the

²¹ It should also be noted that Ambedkar closed his speech in Nagpur in 1957 urging his followers to "educate, organise, agitate" (Michael 1999: 34). The emphasis, however, has to be on organisation if any agitation is to be meaningful. Ambedkar's commitment to democracy would also have prevented him from calling on all Dalits to become mere agitators with no means of gaining power. The importance of organisation is emphasised in a recent Frontline article on the situation in Uttar Pradesh. T.K Rajalakshmi shows that "despite all the rhetoric on Dalit mobilisation, Dalits continue to be killed in the absence of organised political resistance" (2001: 38). The rhetoric inspires a BC backlash that an unorganised community is unable to rebuff. In terms of this thesis the emphasis must be on the strength of the solidarity shown in Muduvarpatti rather than the helplessness of the Kodankipatti Dalits.

killers of Murugesan is no big deal”, he states, but to secure a lasting solution to the problems of the Dalit community there is only one way to proceed:

Countless martyrs have died at the hands of the dominant castes (Aadhika Jadi). To gain a final solution and combat a thousand years of oppression we need to organise. Our community is often referred to as a flock of crows. With crows there is no need actually to throw stones, if you merely bend down they will scatter. But who can throw stones at a swarm of wasps? You cannot. If you throw stones at the wasps they will turn and sting you. We need to become a swarm of wasps. It is our first duty to build an organisational strength capable of protesting against our opponents”.

[Periyasami 30/06/99].

Note: All translations in the text are my own. I would like to thank Edwin for his tireless co-operation, and priceless support during the process of transcription and translation. Several colloquial sayings would have lost their meaning in a direct translation, and I have here substituted the appropriate English equivalent.

SECTION TWO:
The Material Conditions of Dalit Action

I am a Dalit
Due to my ancestor's sweat
Thatch Cottages
Have become tiled houses.
Tiled Houses
Due to my grandfather's blood
Have become tall buildings
Tall Buildings
Due to my father's labour
Have become grand mansions
But we are still homeless
We are begging the Government
For free land deeds.
I, who want to annihilate
Those who wrung toil from our bodies
Say with courage
Yes!
I am a Dalit

(K. Subbaiah, Pondicheri. In *Dalit Mulukkam* Dec. 1998. Trans. Self)

CHAPTER FOUR: COSTS, COERCION, CASH AND CASTE:

The Economic Context of Dalit Protest

“They harvest the paddy, tie up the sheaves and put them in sacks, they winnow it and lay it out to dry. Then they break the husks and extract the rice. Then they grind it on stones for flour. They put all the good rice in sacks for the houses of the dominant, and the remainder with stones and chaff, which is not rice, but some sort of diseased rice they boil up and eat in water that has fermented over three days”.

Thirumavalavan: National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights: 01/12/99.

INTRODUCTION

“There are few beliefs which are more pervasive - or persuasive - than the one which seeks to relate social unrest to changes in the material conditions of people. In its simplest terms this belief maintains that a deterioration in the material conditions of the weaker sections of society leads sooner or later to an increase in social unrest and that an improvement in these conditions leads to harmony and goodwill” (Beteille 1974: 188). This is widely accepted, but of course social movement activity requires resources, and it is arguable that the differentiation of the Dalit community in class terms has *enabled* rather than retarded protest. Indeed, Backward Caste groups maintain that Dalits have only become ‘uppity’ since the introduction of new economic opportunities and value systems (Vincentnathan 1996: 494, Jeffrey 2000: 1014, Kaul 2001: 156). But to suggest that the Dalits have only aspired towards social and economic mobility since the introduction of a different set of norms perpetuates the image of the integrative and harmonious ‘traditional’ caste system.¹ The ideological nature of this idealisation is evident in Buddhist and *Bhakti* critiques of the iniquities of the social structure, and later conversions to Islam and Christianity, which indicate an historical desire to alter the position of those at the bottom end of society.² Here it is argued that the emergence of a

¹ Interestingly, the latest National Curriculum Framework for School Education in India describes the traditional agrarian system in the country as emphasising “self-sufficiency, contentment and operational autonomy for each village” (Rajalakshmi, T.K.: ‘A Biased Agenda’: Frontline, December 22, 2000: pp 92-93). The persistence and proselytising of such opinions renders it even more necessary to question their historical accuracy. See also Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 135).

² “Bhakti or devotional cults”, as Omvedt notes, “rebelled against caste hierarchy and Brahmin domination. Many of these in turn developed into religious traditions that consider themselves explicitly non-Hindu” (1995: 8). Masilamani - the late 19th century author of ‘The Example of Caste Difference’, aimed to establish the inconsistencies in the Brahminical view of caste by maintaining that all people are equal. He raised the question: “If non-Brahmins (e.g. great sages) could grow into brahminhood through good deeds, do brahmins grow out of brahminhood because of their transgressions?” (Rajadurai & Geetha

market economy and the gradual disbanding of the village as the organisational basis of production have been more significant for the rise of social movements than the 'introduction' of a value system that was antithetical to the caste system. Whereas Untouchable protest was marginal and geographically contained before, as shown in Chapter Two, contemporary Dalit movements potentially have the resources and infrastructure to mount a sustained challenge to caste hegemony. Lack of resources rather than lack of will remains the principal hindrance to Dalit protest. The persistence of caste discrimination owes much to its basis in the inequalities that render many Dalits dependent upon their higher caste landlords or employers. There continues to be "a definite correlation between economic and social status" (Mukherjee 1978: 287).³ From this perspective the rise in Dalit protest could be said to be the result of the increasing disjunction between the aspirations fostered by the democratisation of India, and the continuing marginality of the Dalit community (Caplan 1985, Washbrook 1989).⁴ This chapter charts the transformations in the economic conditions of untouchability in order to better understand the material bases of Dalit protest. I argue that whilst the majority of Dalits continue to live in conditions of poverty, the opening up of the economy and the spread of cash payments has provided the community with vital resources to improve their material and political position. I will suggest that poverty cannot be measured according to purely economic criteria but must incorporate various social indicators as well. This not only helps to explain the willingness of Dalits to engage in costly protest activities, but also has implications for Dalit movement programmes.

I: THE HISTORICAL STATUS OF UNTOUCHABLES

SUBSISTENCE AND SLAVERY

Beteille's conclusion, that the Dalits' 'fundamental problem' is an economic one, remains persuasive. "It is a problem of landlessness, poverty and unemployment" (1967: 117). Poverty levels are such that agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu regret the decline of attached or bonded labour, because such a system at least guaranteed job security (Kapadia 1995: 221, Cederlöf 1997: 93, Chattopadhyay 2001: 570). *'Coolie irrundar*

1993: 2096). "In the final analysis", according to Sugirtharaj, "although Bhakti movements became popular among Dalits, insofar as they did not change their socio-economic status, the equality professed by them remained a myth" (1990: 23). Even where the authors of Bhakti songs and hymns lived in harmony with the prevalent system, however, the lyrics registered social protests and raised searching questions (Robb 1993, Zelliott 1996, Vincentnathan 1996).

³ For more up to date analyses of the link between caste and class see the work of Robb (1993), Mendelsohn & Vicziany (1998), Jeffrey (2000), Chattopadhyay (2001), Omvedt (2001), Pai (2001).

thaan Kanji' (only if we get work can we eat) is a common saying across the state. To suggest that Dalits were 'better-off' under a system of caste based specialisation, however, ignores the fact that such retrospective assertions almost inevitably contain an element of nostalgia for a mythical 'better' era (Robb 1993, Deliège 1997). In fact the majority of Untouchables in the past were certainly worse-off and more dependent than they are now, and they were frequently held as slaves. There is some controversy over whether slavery in India is comparable with servitude elsewhere, and about the applicability of the term 'slavery' to define the condition of the landless serfs in India (Prakash 1990, Washbrook 1993, Cederlöf 1997). The caste system may have perpetuated the social and economic deprivation of the lowest castes, but it also accorded them certain 'rights' or obligations.⁵ The most important of a serf's 'rights' was that that of working on a particular piece of land. The landowner had an obligation to employ serfs born on the land and in this sense, according to Kumar (1965), the labourers were arguably not 'landless'. But there is a wealth of evidence that labourers were bought and sold throughout Tamil Nadu. Land deeds often recorded the number of slaves that were part of the sale (Ramachandran 1990, Deliège 1997, Karashima 1997). Most types of servile status were hereditary, and they were confined to members of the lowest castes.

In 'Slavery and Agricultural Bondage in South India in the Nineteenth Century', Hjejle dismisses the notion that "the rise of a class of landless and ill paid agricultural labourers was the result of institutional changes brought about by the British administrators" (1967: 93). She likewise rejects the thesis that bondage in India was mitigated by the existence of codes of reciprocity and obligation. Paraiyars, whether they were serfs or indentured slaves, were barely paid enough to subsist upon (ibid. 93). The British Government formally abolished slavery in India in 1843 but, despite this, elements of servitude were not immediately eradicated. As Verges observed elsewhere, the images, representations and ideology of slavery contaminated the emancipation (1999: 4). Prospective employers offered cash advances to enable indebted workers to take up new occupations. This often resulted in the creation of a new dependency,

⁴ A situation aptly described by Hardgrave and Kochanek (1986), as a 'revolution of rising expectations'.

⁵ A number of authors note the dyadic basis of employment, and the mutual obligations implied in this relationship: Kumar (1965: 45), Ludden (1989: 167), Prakash (1990: 1), Cederlöf (1997: 93). Robb (1993: 47) and Deliège (1997: 53-54) observe that the reciprocity of the arrangement was weighted so as to leave the Dalits in conditions of "semi-slavery".

however, since the British gave legal status to contracts based on debt that bound a 'free' labourer to their patron for life (Ludden 1989, Prakash 1990, Washbrook 1993, Cederlöf 1997, cf. Verges 1999). Employers continued to demand exaggerated respect from their employees and those who failed to obey were threatened with eviction (Kumar 1965: 23, Prakash 1990: 187. See previous Chapter for contemporary landlord/labourer relations). Pre-Capitalist constraints on labour relations, in other words, were transmitted to the capitalist sector through social norms as well as the labour-contractor system (Prakash 1990: 222, Robb 1993: 48, Cederlöf 1997: 98). Payment in kind declined on estates, especially as the spread of public transport required monetary exchange, but it continued to persist in the agrarian sector where it was used to tie labour to the land. Bonded labour and the practice of payment in kind can still be found today but the incidence of both is increasingly rare, and the latter is used to supplement wages rather than replace them.⁶

EMPIRE AND EMANCIPATION: The Gradual Abolition of Slavery

Whilst the British may not have succeeded in completely emancipating labourers from a condition of slavery they did set in train processes of social, political and economic change that served to open up new avenues of social mobility. Although they were wary of the financial costs of emancipation, after the 1830s the British courts did not openly abet the perpetuation of servitude. Weakening the practical sanctions for slavery encouraged a degree of informal emancipation, but in general the labourers were too poor to maximise the opportunities available to them. The monetisation of the economy, the commercialisation of agriculture, the introduction of private property and the establishment of an administrative government, all opened up new avenues for the labouring masses. British Courts provided some means of redress against the daily indignities and violence visited upon dependent labourers (Prakash 1990). A degree of freedom was also accorded by the possibility of seeking employment beyond the boundaries of the village (Kumar: 1965: 44, Ludden 1989: 175, Deliège 1997: 51). Emigration, especially of a seasonal and relatively local nature, was common amongst the impermanent labouring classes. The emigrants would (and, as we shall see later, still

⁶ In Madras Presidency in 1951, as Kumar reports, nearly one-sixth of the agricultural workforce were still tied labourers in some sense or other (*ibid.*). Most frequently this attachment would take the form of debt bondage, a condition that persists into the present day despite government legislation. The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 renders illegal all agreements and obligations serving to perpetuate human bondage.

do) return home with greater knowledge of agricultural techniques, often with some economic reserves, and with less willingness to abide by caste restrictions. The effects of emigration were felt most by hitherto immobile sectors of society, since it helped them escape from tied labour relations and instilled them with the courage to disregard other restrictions (Kumar 1965: 142, Amjad 1989: 2, Carter 1996: 2, Cederlöf 1997: 68, Osella & Osella 2000: 119). Increasing urbanisation and the provision of better modes of transportation and communication enabled the 'Untouchables' to occupy new positions as domestic servants, soldiers in the army, and even acquire some land of their own (Kumar 1965, Deliège 1997, Teltumde 2000).⁷

Towards the end of the 19th century, and in the late 1930s, some moves were made to settle the Dalits onto government land, but this attempt to grant land to the tillers had little impact.⁸ The introduction of private property, and the sale of land, seems to have benefited intermediate castes more than those at the foot of the caste hierarchy (Rudolph & Rudolph 1987, Bardhan 1998). To present the advent of British rule in India as an unqualified advantage for the Dalits, therefore, would be mistaken. The benefits that the Dalits accrued were incidental to, rather than the intention of, the British. The basic structures of caste society remained in place and adapted to the development of capitalism (Rudolphs 1967, Gould 1988, Mitra 1994, Deliège 1997). As Washbrook observes, "the modernising ambitions of the Raj were limited much more than those of Indian nationalism and served to free the economy rather than society" (1989: 248). In an open letter to the Inspector General of Registration in 1892, Pandit C. Iyothi Dass bemoaned the British neglect of the Dalit community. He insisted that Pariahs were the most loyal watchmen, the best domestic servants, the first to convert and the hardest workers.⁹ Despite this, they were "forced to remain always in a degraded condition". The only way for this community to progress, he concludes, is to "obtain special concessions from the hands of our British rulers" (reproduced in Kamalanathan: 1985: 10-18). In the absence of such measures, the introduction of new economic possibilities served merely to reduce the absolute dependency of the lower castes. Perhaps most

⁷ "In most of the decisive battles that established British colonialism in the country", according to Teltumde, "Dalit soldiers played a heroic role, arguably because they also opposed the higher caste/class opponents of the British" (2000: 82).

⁸ See Kumar 1965, Rudolphs 1987, Prakash 1990, Agarwal 1994, Lewis 1995, Subramanian 1999 for the failure of land reforms.

significant in this process has been the introduction of a capitalist mode of peasant farming in which, Mosse observes, “relationships are no longer hereditary and are devoid of extreme expressions of subordination” (1994: 86). The transition from payment in kind to cash based transactions has allowed the subordinate castes to escape the ritual and social stigma of being bound to one employer. As the works of Epstein (1973), Ramachandran (1990), Harriss-White (1996) and Kapadia (1995) show, however, this has not universally been the case. Indeed the expansion in cash crop agriculture and the industrial processing of cotton initially served to reinforce the dependency of agricultural labourers (Cederlöf 1997: 91). There has not been an inexorable move to wage labour across Tamil Nadu and conditions of bondage, and the practice of payment in kind, still persist in parts of the state.¹⁰

II: CASTE, INDEPENDENCE AND ECONOMIC TRANSITION

CLASS AND CASTE: Poverty and Lack of Resources as Chronic

As we enter the 21st Century the condition of the majority of untouchables can still be described in terms of poverty. The recurrent complaint of Dalits, movement members and institutional figures, is that they lack resources. This continuing shortage of funds enables a nostalgic re-imagining of the security provided by the traditional *jajmani* system (Washbrook 1989, Dirks 1996, Cederlöf 1997). “Socio-economic class is one of the most salient forms of identity in South India”, according to Dickey. “Poor Madurai residents speak often, with much resignation, of the difficulties of being poor” (1993: 15).¹¹ Poor Dalits, especially women, frequently suffer from malnutrition, and many live in makeshift shelters for lack of a proper home (Eswaran & Kotwal 1994).¹² Many urban Dalits face a perpetual struggle to make ends meet. In Melavassel self-help networks and schemes abound. The surplus food from hotels is routinely distributed,

⁹ “Pariahs not Brahmins were the ones to join the army and do sapper work which high castes considered degrading. As Pariahs advanced in the army, however, higher-castes started joining, to the exclusion of the noble pioneers” (reproduced in Kamalanathan: 1985: 10-18).

¹⁰ In a recent Frontline report, Ravi Sharma highlighted the case of five Dalit quarry workers in Karnataka who had chains riveted to their legs to prevent them escaping from the quarry where they were employed as stone crushers (Sharma 2000: 45-6). Mendelsohn and Vicziany describe such labour intensive sites as indicative of a new form of poverty based upon proletarian labour in inhumane conditions (1998: 176-8). The current Human Rights Watch report into untouchability in India estimates that “forty million people in India, among them 15 million children, are bonded labourers” (2000: 139).

¹¹ Whilst not questioning the factuality of the above statement, it perhaps requires clarification. ‘Poverty’ is not a matter of identity choice, but a painful reality for many in South India who cannot escape it. Furthermore, it cannot be mapped onto social categories with the ease that is evinced above. To describe the poor as an identity-category in themselves ignores the manifold divisions amongst them - in terms of caste, region, gender and religion, but also in terms of household income.

and many older women set up informal stalls hawking cheap, home-made food. Non-residents shudder at the conditions that pertain in Melavassel, where over-crowding is rife to reduce rents, and the buildings poorly maintained. Such conditions, it should be stressed, are not confined only to Dalits. Many Backward (and some higher) Caste members are also numbered among the very poor, both in urban and rural environments. Despite this, however, there is little evidence of vertical solidarity. Whilst a Marxist analysis of these situations would suppose the poor in India to be suffering from false consciousness, it is clear that poverty as an aspect of identity does *not* impact on all individuals equally. “The poor among the forward castes - who are undoubtedly numerous - have one advantage which the dalits (sic.) do not have, viz., the use of caste links with the rich to obtain a small job or a petty loan”, according to Balagopal. He concedes that not all of them will be successful in this endeavour, “but the possibility is undeniably present” (1990: 2232-3, cf. Harriss 1982, Holmström 1984). Most movement members struggled to make ends meet, but those families that had at least one member in a permanent job were better off than coolies and labourers for whom work is often irregular and seasonal (cf. Jeyaranjan & Swaminathan 1999). The wages that they receive are hardly enough to support their families even before any expenditure on alcohol, debt remittances or household goods.¹³

INCOMES, WAGES AND EXPENDITURE

Real agricultural wages have increased over time, partly because the non-farm sector has expanded and more labourers have migrated or choose to commute (Repetto 1994, World Bank 1997). Shariff estimated that the annual average wage income for an agricultural worker in Tamil Nadu in 1994 amounted to Rs. 2, 725, as compared to a national average of Rs. 2, 848. During her research in northern Tamilnadu in 1995, Rajuladevi (2000) found that 90% of agricultural labourers earned below Rs. 3, 500 a year. Her figures include the wages received in kind converted into cash values. 23.7% of her study earned less than Rs. 2, 265 per annum, and she describes this group of workers as destitute. Such wages cannot support a family, and poor households rarely survive on the earnings of a single worker. Rajuladevi also highlights a wage differential between Wet and Dry Areas in Tamilnadu, with the former generally having more work

¹² “While people do not die of hunger”, as Deliége asserts, “they do die of malnutrition” (1997: 65).

and better pay. Daily wages for transplanting, for example, were Rs. 25 in wet areas but only Rs. 15 in dry conditions (2000: 477). Agricultural wages are also highly seasonal and many agricultural labourers are forced to seek other forms of employment during slack seasons. According to Shariff, Tamil agricultural labourers work an average of 119 days in the year – 18 days less than the national average for India as a whole. Non-Agricultural workers, however, were better-off in T.N than in much of the country, and were employed for 188 days in the year as opposed to the 152-day national average (Shariff 1999: 37). The non-farm sector is also better paid, and the wage differentials between sectors may explain why “Northern Tamil Nadu stands out as a particularly poor region”, despite a 30% reduction in poverty levels in the state between 1957 and 1994 (World Bank 1997, 10 & 20). But such estimates are difficult to substantiate since 90 per cent of the labour force in India reportedly works in the informal sector (Repetto 1994, World Bank 1997, Harriss-White & Subramanian 1999, Nihila 1999, Gopal 1999). As Nihila (1999) and Gopal (1999) observe, informal workers are not only paid less but also lack security, pension funds, sick pay or safety equipment. The World Bank estimates that mean consumption in rupees per person, per month in T.N, rose from Rs. 44.5 to Rs. 63.9 between 1957-60 and 1990-1994 (1997: 50), but such sweeping statistics do not reflect wage differentials between groups or individuals (Janakarajan & Seabright 1999). In contrast to this optimism is the fact that Tamilnadu was the only state where real agricultural wages for females declined in the 1980s (Repetto 1994, Harriss-White & Janakarajan 1997).

Also, the rise in wages or consumption does not take the increase of casual wage-labour into account (Repetto 1994, World Bank 1997, Harriss-White 1999, Nagaraj 1999, Rajuladevi 2000). Jeyaranjan and Swaminathan (1999) point out that temporary or casual labourers receive less pay for the same work. They noted that “a significant number” (around 13%) of the non-farm industry workers whom they interviewed in Ambattur, earned less than Rs. 500 a month, whereas most established workers earned between 501 and 2000 rupees. Whilst the educated can often afford to wait for work and register as unemployed, the poorer households cannot afford to discriminate between jobs (Repetto 1994, Rajuladevi 2000). This insecurity means that agricultural wages

¹³ It is instructive that even macro studies such as the World Bank (1997), Shariff (1999) note that poverty is exacerbated by expenditure on alcohol, debt and food. This suggest the widespread nature of the problem.

tend to fall in slack seasons, because people have no option but to accept the work. During the long-running labour dispute at the Manjulai Tea-Estate, Puthiya Tamilagam called for a 'living wage' of 150 rupees a day. As the estate owners and government point out, however, the estate's offer of Rs. 63.9 for an 8-hour day was amongst the better rates in the country (Hindu 02/07/99). The vulnerability and insecurity of agricultural labourers is highlighted by the fact that the Estate were arbitrarily able to dock wages, by accusing the workers of adopting 'go-slow' tactics. Across the state, Dalits told me that they had to accept as little as Rs. 25-40 a day in barren months. Minimum wages, as the Rudolphs noted, "are observed more in breach than practice" (1987: 266, Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 84). As a result, "the poorest of the poor work less hours and get paid less" (Shariff 1999: 83). Both the World Bank (1997) and the Second India Revisited study (Repetto 1994), suggest that the expansion of the non-farm economy is pushing up real wages and providing employment. But Harriss-White and Janakarajan deny that the non-agricultural sector can offset the poverty of the most disadvantaged, since such employment is "biased against women, against the lowest castes and the poorest classes" (1997: 1476). The increasing engagement in non-farm activities may, therefore, be indicative of the increasing casualisation of labour, poverty and landlessness (Rajuladevi 2000: 476).

UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT: The Influence of Caste in Contemporary Society

Whilst the caste system may be said to have 'modernised',¹⁴ the modernist assumption that caste would disintegrate in the face of economic change, urbanisation and increasing industrialisation has proved to be unfounded. Rather, "under the impact of market transactions, the two faces of caste have interacted to produce economic communities to promote collective interest" (Mitra 1994: 64, cf. Rudolphs 1967: 100, Gould 1988: 7, Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 216-222). Not only has there been a proliferation of caste based associations, there has also been an extension of caste prejudices and practices into the 'modern' sector. It is a general assumption that employers give preference to caste members (Kolenda 1978, Nagaraj 1999, Radhakrishnan 1999). Dalit workers in Madurai frequently echoed these sentiments, and many Dalits felt the need to shroud their social origins in order to advance in the job

¹⁴ The opening up of education to all, the exercise of government patronage (most visible in the compensatory discrimination practised on behalf of ex-Untouchables), and the steadily expanding

market. Furthermore, castes tend to monopolise the modern jobs that approximate to their traditional specialities (Kolenda 1978: 145, cf. Harriss 1982, Gould 1988, Nihila 1999). Nirmala, the co-ordinator of the Municipal Workers Union, observes that 90% of the members are Dalits, and 10% are poor non-Dalits for whom considerations of impurity and so on are of less importance than the rates of pay (Informal interview 12/12/98, cf. Reddy 1990, Sharma 1991). Whilst many modern jobs are seen to be ritually neutral, therefore, the untouchable castes still predominate in occupations perceived as degrading such as sweeping and cleaning. Post-independence economic policies have arguably served to strengthen the main proprietary classes (the industrial and agrarian bourgeoisie), and they have benefited most from state policies.¹⁵ Indeed, Herring argues that the dominant local castes and the state are enmeshed to the extent where it is not possible to separate them from each other (in Lerche 1998: A29). Whilst not going so far, the Rudolphs (1987) make a similar argument for Tamil Nadu where they argue that agriculturist associations and interest groups became the arbiters of politics and policy in the state. Tanner (1995), in Karnataka, notes the significance of land reform and elections in eroding traditional patron-client ties. Kapadia (1995) and Gough (1991), however, recount how the proposed legislation to give land to the tiller in Tamil Nadu in 1969, actually backfired, because worried landlords reclaimed all the land habitually held by Dalit labourers. Subramanian argues that Dravidian dominance of the public sphere inhibited concerted mobilisation for further land reform in Tamil Nadu (1999: 65), and often the landowners, having registered the land in the names of their dependants, continued as if nothing had altered. The issue, as Agarwal notes, “is not just one of property ownership; it is also that of property control” (1994: xv).

THIS LAND IS OUR LAND: Land Struggles and Landlessness in Tamil Nadu

Given the number of Dalits employed as landless labourers it should come as little surprise that land remains the principle demand of the Dalit movements in Tamilnadu.¹⁶

franchise are, as Kothari observes, “the three influences that have penetrated the caste system and involved it by stages” (1986: 13).

¹⁵ On this subject see: Kohli 1987, Bardhan 1988, Vanaik 1990, Eswaran & Kotwal 1994, Bardhan 1998, Corbridge & Harriss 2000.

¹⁶ Sudha Pai (2000) and Bardhan (1998) amongst others suggest that education rather than land offers the quickest route for upward mobility. Given the intractability of land-holdings this may be true, but land remains critically important as a basis for mobility and/or the perpetuation of structural inequalities (see Agarwal 1994). As discussed later, Dalit activists see education as crucial, but they generally lack the resources to mount literacy campaigns. Land-grab protests are more high profile (in media terms), offer the prospect of a short-term solution, and resonate with the immediate grievances of Dalit movement members. Pai, somewhat controversially, argues that the “traditional structures of rural dominance based

This is manifested in calls for land reform programmes or in efforts to redeem Panchami land but, “as far as the untouchable landless and near-landless are concerned, such political will has never been exerted on their behalf by any government” (Kapadia 1995: 197). Given the inadequacy of land reform measures, Dalit movements have started to organise and protest around land issues across India. The most prominent Tamil struggle over land took place in 1994 in Karanai, Chengleput District. After failing to have the alienated Panchami land returned, Dalit movements proceeded to occupy the plot. They marked their presence symbolically with the erection of a statue of Ambedkar, and staged protests demanding legal recognition of their tenancy. The desecration of this statue led to violent protests and stone throwing outside the court in Chengleput, during which the police opened fire on the demonstrators, injuring many and killing two of the leading activists: John Thomas and Ezhilmalai (Moses 1995, Fr. Yesumarian 1995, Kadirvelu 1998, Pandiyan 1999). “These two deaths”, as D’Souza of the Republican Party, who was present at the shooting, recalls, “led to a concerted struggle, and highlighted the issue of Panchami land in the state” (Interview 17/01/99).¹⁷ Subsequent to this struggle the issue has been raised recurrently, but rarely with such determination and cohesion.¹⁸ The prime importance of land for the untouchables has been reinforced by their imperfect integration into the modern economy. Landless Dalits have remained impoverished since alternative sources of income are unavailable, partly due to caste discrimination (Eswaran and Kotwal 1994, Kapadia 1995). Somandam, the assistant regional leader of the Working Peasants Movement in Myaladuthurai District, emphasised the importance of land to the uplift of the Dalit community: “Now we are working for a daily coolie of Rs.20-30/-. If we had our own land to work on, we who are

on land and social status are undergoing change, and that ownership of land is not as important a source of power and prestige as in the past” (2000: 192). This may reflect the influence of the BSP Government in Uttar Pradesh where her study is based. Jeffery, Jeffery & Jeffrey (forthcoming), however, suggest that Dalits remain to a considerable extent dependent on the local landowners for their subsistence and that change is slow (Social & Political Dominance in Western UP: A draft response to Sudha Pai). Interestingly, in a more recent article, Pai (2001) asserts that “land and ritual status, remain the main source of ... socio-economic dominance in village affairs” (2001: 648). The balance of power in her example has rests with the Dalits who are better off than the OBCs.

¹⁷ Mathivanan and Somandam, of the Working Peasants Movement, confirmed the impact of the Karanai struggle when I interviewed them in September 1999. Asked how they were aware of Panchami land and the need to reclaim it, they replied: “First, first near Chengleput, in Karanai, certain Dalit leaders and movements raised the issue. That is when we heard about Panchami Land” (28/09/99).

¹⁸ “The protest has run out of steam of late”, as the journalist Pandiyan observes, before noting that the “Panchami Land Reclamation Movement intends to use the 5th anniversary of the deaths to restart the struggle” (1999: 38-9).

hungry ten days in every month would at least have Kanji (boiled rice steeped in water) to eat. One acre per person would be sufficient for this purpose” (Interview 29/09/99).¹⁹

LAND AND POWER: The Failure of Land Reform

Landownership continues to be highly concentrated. The 1982 National Social Survey report on Land Holdings shows that 19% of the Tamil population are landless households (in Kapadia 1995). The Human Development report survey, compiled by Shariff (1999), suggests that Tamilnadu has one of the highest concentrations of rural land ownership in India. Those Dalits who do own land, fall into the category of marginal landowners, and their land is seldom irrigated (Kapadia 1995, Harriss-White 1996, Shariff 1999, Human Rights Watch 2000). Nearly 70 per cent of Tamil Scheduled Castes in the employment market work in the agrarian sector, and 55% work as agricultural labourers (T.N Govt. 1999). Land is the prime asset in rural areas and is instrumental in determining both the living standard of the occupants, and their social status. “The negative relation between the risk of rural poverty and land access”, as Agarwal insists, “is well established. Apart from the direct production advantages through growing crops, fodder or trees, land titles increase access to credit, enhance bargaining power with employers, help push up aggregate real wage rates, and serve as mortgageable or saleable assets in crises” (1998: A4; cf. Lewis 1995: 345, Ramachandran 1997: 287). Given these advantages it becomes obvious that the failure to implement effective land reform programmes has curtailed the decision-making capacity of Dalit communities by rendering them dependent upon others for work (Kohli 1987: 8, Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998: 157, Nagaraj 1999: 79, Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 215). In recognition of this the British Government, in 1892, passed a Government Ordinance that assigned available forest and wastelands to the Dalits across India.²⁰ Likewise, Governments in independent India have instituted various land reform programmes with varying success. Citing the successful reforms of the Communist Party in West Bengal, Kohli (1987) argues that a well organised, left-of-centre regime is

¹⁹ See Agarwal (1994) and World Bank (1997) for the importance of land for subsistence.

²⁰ Designated as Panchami (Depressed Class) land, the acreage was ceded under certain conditions of tenure: The land could not be sold, given, mortgaged or leased for the first ten years, and after this it could only be transferred to another Dalit (Kadirvelu 1998, Pandiyan 1999). The Act rendered any transactions that transgressed these conditions legally untenable. As Pandiyan observes, however, uneducated Dalits failed to realise the significance of Panchami Land and of the conditions attached to it. Dalits who emigrated due to poverty or famine were conned into selling it prior to their departure. Coercion, forgery and deception were employed to obtain the land, which “is how the dominant castes come to be in possession of Panchami land” (Pandiyan 1999: 38-9).

required to initiate redistributive programmes (cf. Corbridge & Harriss 2000: Chapter 9, Chattopadhyay 2001). Since land continues to be the basis of economic advancement in rural communities, rural inequality cannot be tackled by moderate reforms. Where landholdings have remained static, therefore, landless households and marginal landholders should be targeted as the beneficiaries of the emerging non-agricultural sector (Nihila 1999, Shariff 1999).

III: EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

A: THE AGRARIAN SECTOR

LAND & LABOUR: Poverty, Landlessness & Dependency

The majority of Tamil Dalits continue to work in the agrarian sector. Manual agricultural tasks were traditionally reserved for the lower castes since ploughing the land was deemed to be demeaning, and because various leather implements were used. A significant minority of Dalits cultivate their own land, but as most are either landless or marginal landholders their options are limited (Govt. of TN 1999). “We are not educated”, as Kannima from Kodankipatti observed, “we can only do coolie work” (Interview 20/03/99). Coolie work refers to daily wage labour. This is usually agricultural work but can involve odd jobs such as mending fences, loading lorries, or carrying bricks. Most Dalits work in nearby fields in return for a daily wage of between Rs. 28 and Rs. 60 (£ 0.45 and £0.90 at the 2000 exchange rate). The women are usually paid just over half of what the men receive due to a legal wage differential, but the amount of work they do is often comparable (Kapadia 1995, Jeyaranjan & Swaminathan 1999, Rajuladevi 2000). The work is seasonal in nature and highly erratic. “When it is wet we have work, when it is dry we go hungry and the coolie rate goes down”, Durairaj, an elderly agricultural labourer from Karur District explained (Interview 19/10/99). In dry seasons the wage was said to drop far below the minimum coolie rate, but “the recommended wage is never given” according to Jayseelan of the Republican Party (Interview 26/04/99).

Whilst movements fight to raise the levels of pay and to standardise the income of male and female workers, labourers themselves are often resigned. “Going hungry is not unusual for us”, Kameswari, an agricultural labourer in Myaladuthurai insisted. Landless, rural labourers lived in thatched mud huts with little space, rarely any electricity and no tap. Water was available from nearby hand-pumps though its quality

was variable.²¹ Women usually squatted outside the houses to cook on wood or kerosene stoves because it was too hot and dark inside. As a result of popular state government schemes, however, increasing numbers of the community live in *pucca* (brick and mortar) houses, and have electricity connections. On average, more households in rural Tamilnadu have access to electricity, piped water and the Public Distribution System (PDS) than in India as a whole, but the number of houses without such amenities is still significant (Shariff 1999).²² The PDS gives poor households access to subsidised rice, kerosene and other products but the quality is poor and there are frequent complaints of bias in the process of distribution. Much of the rice cooked in rural Dalit households is obtained from their place of work and helps to supplement their income. Lentils, vegetables and meat are scarce, however, and people commonly sit down to rice steeped in water (*kanji*) which is livened up with pickle, raw mango or dried fish (*karuvaad*).

A consequence of the Dalit's continuing dependence on landlords for work is that elements of the tied labour system still persist in rural areas. Although Dalits are theoretically free to seek work elsewhere there are often few alternatives available to them (Kapadia 1995: 195, Shariff 1999: 45 & 83, Subramanian and Harriss-White 1999: 21, Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 211, 217). A pattern has emerged whereby the villagers who agree to perform the caste tasks that are usually reserved for the Untouchables, such as bearing death news and beating drums, are given work whilst those that refuse are ostracised. Dalits are usually paid for such tasks now, and contracts are often negotiated before the work is undertaken, but in villages across Tamilnadu Dalits who reject such roles are subject to social boycott (See Chapter 3). Gough (1978) and Ramachandran (1990) report a decline in the number of attached labourers since Independence, but labour in this sense *is dependent* upon the compliance of the Dalits. "We could refuse, as Durairaj explained, but that would create bad blood between us, and we depend upon the higher castes for coolie work" (Interview 19/10/99). In Kodankipatti and Vadianpatti Dalits had to seek employment outside the village since they were not given work locally. "Everyone is migrating to towns now, where caste is hidden to an extent and one can use one's skill to obtain employment", according to

²¹ In the Myaladuthurai area Prawn farms had caused salination, and villages had to walk further and further afield to find potable water. The provision of drinking water and electricity was a major theme of the 2001 Assembly Election campaign.

Valentine, a women's wing leader of the Communist Party. "But we cannot all go!" (Speech 25/10/99).

The mechanisation of agriculture, however, is reducing the demand for labour and the bargaining power of the Dalit community. Karunakaran, a social worker and activist in Andhra Pradesh, insists that technical modernisation will gradually eliminate the more arduous and degrading aspects of agricultural work, but it will also result in increasing unemployment. "Even today our coolies and agricultural labourers sit hungrily by while their jobs are replaced by machines. This is a very dangerous trend that will reduce employment opportunities, and cause the take-over of more land. Before it used to take four people to plough a field, now the jobs of hundreds of people are performed by one machine" (Interview 13/10/99). Such views are not a conservative defence of the prevailing agrarian structures, and Dalit and Women's movements actively seek better employment conditions for manual and unskilled labourers, as well as campaigning for the proper implementation of policies of positive discrimination.²³ While jobs which used to be the male's preserve have been mechanised, however, "the very low wages that are paid to women make the mechanisation of female tasks both unnecessary and uneconomic" (Kapadia 1995: 209/210, Rajuladevi 2000: 475). The decline in agricultural work, therefore, has coincided with the 'feminisation of agrarian labour' and the increasing casualisation of the workforce (Ramachandran 1990: 237, Kapadia 1995: 194, Gopal 1999: WS16, Nihila 1999: WS22). In this context of large-scale reorientation of livelihoods and physical work, there has been a trend towards the 'de-agrarianisation' of the rural economy.

B: THE MODERN SECTOR

CASUALISATION AND SUB-CONTRACTING: New Forms of Tied Labour

Although we saw the problems associated with the non-farm sector earlier, "the non-agricultural rural economy is no longer marginal it is of central importance in the reproduction of rural society" (Harriss-White & Janakarajan 1997: 1475). About eight

²² 63% of households in rural Tamilnadu use electricity, 50% have piped water, and 82 % make use of the PDS according to the Human Development Profile of Rural India, 1994 (in Shariff 1999). This compares favourably to a national average of 43%, 25% and 33% respectively.

²³ When it was announced that a number of cotton mills around Madurai were being closed down, for example, the DPI took out a protest meeting in conjunction with the unions. Dalit movements such as the Working Peasants Movement, also campaign ceaselessly for an end to the legal differentiation in pay according to gender.

per cent of Dalits have also been able to secure work as government employees (many municipal workers, but also electricians, drivers, teachers, clerks etc.) or manage their own businesses. It would be premature, however, to see this as the 'sector of the future'. Whilst the percentage of Dalits employed in the 'modern sector' has increased substantially, the majority still work as unskilled, manual labourers engaged in brick-making, agricultural labour and coolie work (Deliège 1997: 57-9, Majumdar 1999: 276, Nagaraj 1999: 74). Young Dalits aspire towards careers in the modern sector, Deliège notes, but whilst the demand for manual work is high, 'modern' jobs remain limited (1997: 58). The lack of skilled jobs in rural areas means that educated youth either have to revise their expectations or migrate elsewhere. The Dalits in Kodankipatti, who have been subject to a social boycott by local landlords, asked for government enterprises to provide jobs for rural Dalits. "In the higher caste milk societies and dairies", they insisted, "there is no work for Dalits" (18/03/99).

In Tamil Nadu, a new wave of capitalist development has revitalised the rural economy, but this has largely been unskilled, small-scale commodity production.²⁴ The Dalit communities that I visited, particularly in Karur District, are heavily involved in weaving and textile home industries. As seen earlier, however, this proletarianisation of the rural workforce has not necessarily heralded a new era of opportunity predicated on free market contracts. Although the government occasionally clamps down on the factories and urban workshops, members of the Dalit Liberation Movement insisted that children were still employed in home industries, often being withdrawn from school for this purpose (cf. Gopal 1999: WS16). Semi-autonomous, sub-contracted householders utilise their family members as cheap or unremunerated labourers in weaving, fireworks, beedi and other industries (Discussion 14/12/98).²⁵ Nihila's study, of tanning industries in Western Tamilnadu, suggests that whilst the prospects for employment may be rising, "the quality of the employment has deteriorated" (1999: WS-26).

CASTE CONNECTIONS: Caste Based Access to Careers

Unni (1998) observes that wage employment is unlikely to absorb the growing supply of labour, and this shortfall is likely to hit the Untouchables hardest, because they lack the

²⁴ See also: Harriss White & Janakarajan (1997: 1475), Gopal (1999: WS12), Jeyaranjan & Swaminathan (1999: WS2), and Nihila (1999: WS22).

²⁵ Harriss-White (1996: 248) and Gopal (1999) have more detail on this topic.

connections or capital to set up on their own.²⁶ According to the Eighth Five Year Plan projections, “some 94 million persons (new entrants plus unemployed backlog) who will seek employment between 1997-2002 (GOI 1992: 120) will have to find work largely as self-employed or casual workers” (Agarwal 1994: 25, cf. Sundaram 2001). The city streets are not paved with gold for them either. Harriss (1982) notes that opportunities are limited in urban areas, and cites continuing discrimination against Dalits as employees. Madras industrialised rapidly post independence, creating new industries and establishing an industrial bourgeoisie. Ex-Untouchables, however, have experienced little social mobility and they predominate in the poorly paid, unskilled city jobs (Caplan 1985, Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998). Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998) chart the rise of a ‘new Indian proletariat’ engaged in unskilled, manual labour in demeaning conditions. “The barrier to entry into the secure labour force”, as Harriss-White states, “is not geographical but social” (1996: 249). Balasubramaniam from Kodankipatti has a good job in an insurance firm but he insists that most Dalits are still tied to caste specialities. “Why is it only Chakkiliyars who stitch shoes?” he asks rhetorically, “and why is it only upper caste people in suits who sell them?” Despite legislation that renders such discrimination a punishable offence, caste is still of vital importance in institutionalising labour arrangements (Harriss 1982, Robb 1993, Harriss-White 1996, Kapadia 1995, Gopal 1999). ‘Transference’ is often used, and the employers maintain that “Harijans would like to work for us but feel themselves to be unclean” (Harriss-White 1996: 250). Recruitment to the permanent labour force is often carried out through networks of Kin and Caste.²⁷ Low Castes, as Harriss-White notes, consequently find it difficult to secure regular wage work, let alone set up in trade (1996: 261).

C: THE PUBLIC SECTOR

BLACK PAPER/WHITE PAPER: Reservations and the Scheduled Castes

Given the social constraints that Dalits face in the employment market, the reservation of places for the Scheduled Castes in the Public Sector assumes added importance. The reservations system has been crucial in de-linking caste and occupation, and in

²⁶ Gould (1988), Kapadia (1995), Harriss-White (1996), Harriss-White & Janakarajan (1997), Nagaraj (1999) provide similar arguments.

²⁷ On this issue see also: Rudolphs (1967: 132), Holmström (1984: 246), Gould (1988: 14, 167), , Harriss-White (1996: 250, 313), Omvedt 2001 (hyperlink given in bibliography). Beteille (1991:10, 22) argues that caste ties are being steadily eroded in modern India and that family ties, as distinct from caste ones, are more important to the reproduction of inequality. As family ties and informal connections are still largely dictated by caste, however, the process of erosion still has has far to go.

establishing a layer of well-educated and prosperous Dalits. Dalit leaders, however, frequently assert that Government quotas for the SCs remain unfilled and that Dalits are preponderantly employed in the lower echelons of Government Service, a claim that is supported by several sociological studies of the reservation system (Gallanter 1991, Sebastian 1994, Radhakrishnan 1999). A recurrent demand of Tamil activists in the past three years has been for the publication of a white paper on reservations. In the absence of such a document, Dalit institutions conducted their own research and came up with figures that they released as a 'Black Paper' in December 1999. It is evident from such studies that reservations have yet to filter down to the lowest strata of society. In 1974, according to the 1986-87 Report of the Commissioner for SCs and STs, the representation of Scheduled Castes in Public Sector Enterprises varied significantly according to the class of employment in question.

Class I jobs are the highest in the administrative and managerial services, and SCs constituted just over 1 per cent of this category. Class II posts are lower administrative and managerial positions, Class III employees belong to the clerical cadre, and Class IV employees (excluding Sweepers) are peons, attendants, drivers and so on. Scheduled Castes comprised around 3 %, 10 %, and 25 % of these bands respectively. There is an inverse ratio between the desirability of a job and the number of Dalits employed in those positions. It is telling that in the final category of sweepers the Scheduled castes made up 81 per cent of the workforce. In total Dalits made up 18 % of the workforce in accordance with quotas set by the government, but the disproportionate numbers of Dalits in the most menial positions somewhat tempers the significance of the reservation provisions (Sebastian 1994: 78-79, Sharma 1991). Even such levels of representation, it should be stressed, are not met in the private sector. Over the years there *has* been an incremental rise in the number of Dalits in the higher classes of jobs, and a gradual decline in the number of SCs in the sweeper positions. "Like all remedial redistributions", however, as Gallanter observes, "compensatory discrimination imposes its own arbitrariness and unfairness" (1991: 547). The emergence of a privileged elite within the SCs, and the failure to extend similar provisions to Muslim and Christian Dalits and the poor among the higher castes are examples of a lack of parity in the reservation system. Despite this, reservations do significantly affect the aspirations of those who have traditionally been deprived of such life chances. "A dream begins", as

Kancha Illaiah puts it, “because here is a person who came from their neighbouring family, who bears their name and has now become knowledgeable” (1990: 2308).

PRIVATION AND PRIVATISATION: Liberalisation and Unemployment

Writing in 1996, Gopal Guru raised the prospect of caste finally being eroded as economic liberalisation does away with the networks of patronage and politics associated with compensatory discrimination. When freed from the state requirement to set aside quotas, however, most employers will arguably opt for a caste Hindu over a SC person. Economic liberalisation does not hold out much hope for the Dalits who are unlikely to benefit from any generation of jobs in the private sector (Kohli 1987, Eswaran & Kotwal 1994, Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998). Indeed, as the public sector shrinks reservations will increasingly lose their significance, since private employers are not required to fill any quotas. The administration of social justice, as Kohli (1987) and Sen (1997) observe, requires an active rather than a Liberal state. Even today quotas for the SCs are not straightforward and there are persistent reports of places remaining unfilled. Housing schemes, loans and food subsidies have rendered it much easier for Dalits to embark on entrepreneurial ventures, but their living standards are extremely low (Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 217). Widespread corruption and the need for contacts also limit the impact of such schemes.²⁸ As Chandra Bose of the TIP puts it: “There are some benefits for him (the ordinary Dalit), enough to prevent him from continually protesting. The government, thus, keeps him oppressed. It neither lets him live, nor will it let him die” (Interview 23/02/99).

D: MOVING ON

MIGRATION AND MOBILITY: Alternative Paths to Social Change

Given the limited opportunities at home, the opportunity to work abroad is an avenue of change that is frequently aspired to (Nayyar 1989, Osella & Osella 2000). Increasing numbers of Dalits (and other groups) are seeking jobs in the Gulf States or in the Asian Tiger Economies, so as to improve their financial position (Amjad 1989). Emigration has a long history in India, and has often been a response to unemployment or famine, and has been seen as a path to social mobility (Kazi 1989, Carter 1996, Osella & Osella 2000). Conflicting experiences succeed in portraying such jobs either as ‘dreams come

²⁸ World Bank 1997, Harriss-White 1999, Rajuladevi 2000, Jeffrey 2000 have more detail on this issue.

true', or as exploitative and dangerous. Families usually have to borrow substantial amounts to finance the initial journey, and so there is pressure on the migrant to succeed. Often such money ends up in the pockets of unscrupulous middlemen, and scams purporting to ease passage to the Gulf are legion. Wages in the destination countries are high in Indian terms, however, even for the most menial of jobs. The intention of those applying for such situations is to work for two or three years in order to secure enough income to build a house, fund a wedding, or accumulate savings.²⁹ The visa requirements of the host countries also preclude much longer tenures. The remittances from abroad accord the families of such workers a degree of financial stability, and even affluence. Venkatraghavan, a middle class Dalit college student in Vellore, reiterated this when he stated that "Dalits have begun to rise up now, and they are conscious of their position. Many of them have jobs abroad in the Gulf, Singapore and Dubai so they have money and are dominant in the villages" (Interview 20/01/99). As Kazi (1989) points out, few migrants return to the jobs they had prior to their departure, and about a third of them attempt to start up new businesses.

The "new-found wealth and access to consumption may dramatically alter their status and their relationships with others", as Osella and Osella observe, "and offer them the chance to forge new identities" (2000: 119). A high proportion of remittances is expended on conspicuous consumption and consumer durables (Amjad 1989, Nair 1989). This new found prosperity has led to increased tensions between the Dalits and the Backward castes - who feel that their status is challenged by the material prosperity of the families with connections abroad. This resentment has fuelled a BC backlash in several places, most notably in the village of Kodiyanikulam in the south of Tamilnadu. "Kodiyanikulam has at least one graduate per house and Gulf workers" (Viswanathan 1995: 40-41). On July 26th 1995, a statue of a Thevar (BC) leader was desecrated leading to intense Dalit/Marava (a Thevar caste) clashes.³⁰ The residents of Kodiyanikulam were not involved in these clashes, but the police entered the village in force, ostensibly in search of trouble-makers, and proceeded to destroy property worth hundreds of thousands of rupees (Ibid. cf. Human Rights Watch 2000, Ambedkar Centre for Peace and Justice). The police are alleged to have specifically targeted consumer

²⁹ Nair (1989), Amjad (1989), and Nayyar (1989) give detailed economic analyses of these processes, whilst Osella & Osella (2000) provide rich ethnographic detail from Kerala.

durables and the passports and testimonials of educated Dalit youth, as well as poisoning the main drinking water well. The police insisted that the raid was justified in its attempts to capture Dalits allegedly involved in the murder of three Thevars in a nearby village. Indeed, the Justice P. Gomathinayagam Commission of Enquiry into the incidents, published in November 1999, stated that there was 'no excess' in the police action at Kodiyanikulam (Hindu 25/11/00). Movement leaders across the state - who burnt copies of the report - and journalists, suspect that it was "the relative affluence of the Dalits that attracted the attention of the uniformed men. The idea, it appears, was to destroy their economic base, because the police feel the Kodiyanikulam Dalits provide moral and material support to the miscreants in surrounding areas" (Mani, Sunday Times of India: 1995). Caste discrimination, it is clear, persists regardless of economic class.

IV: POVERTY ISSUES: THE INCIDENCE AND INTENSITY OF POVERTY **POVERTY AND PROTEST**

Most Dalits continue to live in poor conditions with access to few resources. Despite this, some Dalits devote themselves to the cause of social equality, ignoring difficulties at home.³¹ None of the activists in Dalit movements were paid for their work, and their families frequently sought to tie movement members down by marrying them off, or finding them a job. "The urban Untouchable", however, as Khare notes, "is seldom a passive subject/object of caste discrimination" (1984:115). Informal solidarity networks of friends, neighbours and family are drawn upon by those who wish to devote themselves to social activism. The families of the more involved activists have to bear the burden of an extra person to clothe and feed - who draws heavily on the family purse without contributing to it (Interview with the sister of an activist 3/07/99). The 'orator' of the Liberation Panther movement, for example, had to rely upon other members of the movement to fund his trips to meetings. The differences between urban and rural Untouchables are not negligible; The former have greater access to education and

³⁰ The Maravas have a 'tradition' of martial and lawless behaviour and were branded as a 'criminal tribe' by the British.

³¹ Based on estimates from Madurai it is a tiny percentage of the Dalit population that is devoted to social movement activity. Rounding up the number of Dalits in the city to 200,000 it is clear that only about 0.01% of Dalits were active on a regular basis. Demonstrations rarely had more than 2,000 people in attendance. This tiny segment of the population, however, has a disproportionate impact. The Dalits of Kodankipatti and Vadianpatti, for example, were persuaded to renounce the caste jobs assigned to them partly because of the work of these activists.

'ritually neutral' jobs, and they are more aware of their legal rights.³² But even urban Untouchables are predominantly poor, and they share with their rural counterparts a pervasive sense of social and economic insecurity born of poverty. As women's movements in Madras found, it is difficult to agitate for rights when basic needs are not being met (Mageli 1997: 48). Dalit movement leaders frequently complained about a similar difficulty in mobilising protestors, and funding their campaigns. Chandra Bose of the TIP noted that, "rather than thinking about the paradise of tomorrow, people wish to end today's hunger" (23/02/99). Lack of resources is a severe problem for most Dalit families and the loss of a valuable wage earner to movement activities is hard to stomach: yet people continue to protest.

DEFINING POVERTY

To limit and objectify the category of 'poverty' in purely socio-economic terms, therefore, would be mistaken. "It is wrong", as Oommen insists, "to think that the poor perceive deprivation only, or even mainly, in terms of material conditions" (1990: 57). A distinction is often made between absolute and relative poverty in which absolute poverty is defined as lacking the means of subsistence and relative poverty refers to an individual or group's lack of resources when compared to other members in society (Marshall 1994: 409). The scale of poverty in a given society is usually calculated through an analysis of household income. According to Rajuladevi, this is "the best indicator of economic and social position, because annual income represents the net outcome of household productive capabilities and resources" (2000: 475). This focus on income is unnecessarily limiting, however, since poverty is not only determined by the impoverished state in which an individual lives, but also in the foreclosure of opportunities (Dreze & Sen 1995: 11, 1997: ix, Majumdar 1999: 283). Dreze and Sen's (1995: 11) concept of 'capability' is essentially about the degree of autonomy a person has in deciding what kind of life they want to lead. Equality-related capabilities such as self-esteem, protection from violence, and the ability to participate in society and politics are valuable to people even if they remain poor and hungry (Dreze and Sen 1995: 13, Janakarajan & Seabright 1999: 331, Majumdar 1999: 269). Economic inequality *obviously* curtails Dalit's access to these assets, but this assertion arguably obscures the significance of socio-structural inequalities. As we have seen, self-esteem,

³² In a 1977 study, however, N.Jeyaram found that improvements such as higher education only served as 'status stabilisers' that left the Untouchables adrift of the caste Hindus (in D'Souza 1985).

protection from violence and other capabilities are often denied to *Dalits even if they are rich and successful* (cf. Oommen 1990). Inequalities build on each other (Dreze & Sen 1997: ix), and Dalits may thus be said to suffer from 'cumulative deprivation' (Oommen 1990: 255).

Someone who is economically poor but has influential connections, a good education and physical well-being, in other words, has more opportunities to better themselves than a poor person without these attributes. We need, therefore, to differentiate between the *incidence* of poverty - referring to the numbers of people subsisting under the poverty line - and the *intensity* of poverty, which refers to the cumulative aspects of inequality (Shariff 1999: 38). It is clear that "the relevant dimensions of inequality include not only income (or expenditure) but also health achievements, literacy rates, self-esteem and other aspects of well-being" (Dreze & Sen 1995: 96). Dalits feature prominently among the poor according to both the incidence and intensity of poverty and the two can be reinforcing (Shariff 1999: 38). Many Untouchable women and children, thus, forfeit an education either to save expense, or because their income generating capacity is required (Dickey 1993, Kapadia 1995, Gopal 1999, Ravindran 1999, Subramanian & Harriss-White 1999, Kaul 2001). The high levels of illiteracy in the Dalit community are central to their continuing poverty. Inequalities in education not only reflect social disparities, as Sen (1997: 14) notes, they are instrumental in *sustaining* them. Illiteracy not only denies people access to alternative means of subsistence in the modern sector, but also means that Dalits are unable to make best use of the opportunities offered to them. Local Backward Caste officials are able to exploit this lack of education to defraud Dalits of loans and compensation claims. An increase in awareness and literacy enables people to take a more active role in politics and local decision making and increases their capability levels. It is surprising, therefore, that "the social value of *basic education* has been neglected not only by government authorities but also in social and political movements" (Dreze & Sen 1995: 137).

LITERACY AND LIBERATION

The literacy rate for Dalits is persistently lower than that of the population as a whole. In 1991 the literacy rate for Scheduled Caste men stood at 58% compared to the 74 per cent figure for Tamil males in general. Women are less literate than the men across India, and only 35% of SC women were literate as opposed to 51% of all Tamil

women.³³ There is a common perception that this enables the upper castes to defraud them of their rights and dues in various ways. Illiterate Dalits often claim that they have been made to sign forms, in order to obtain a loan or to register a case, that have subsequently transpired to entitle somebody else to the money, or to dismiss any criminal charges. Contrary to Dreze & Sen's assertion above, education is one of the recurrent themes of Dalit movements. Kamaraj, a manual labourer who has studied till 9th Grade (the penultimate year before GCSE equivalents), is a member of the DPI. "Education is most important for our development" he maintains, "that is why the higher castes do not want us to study. If we did we would leave for other jobs, and then who would clean the toilets?" (Interview: 13/03/99). "Literacy tends to bestow multiple benefits on its practitioners", as Mendelsohn and Vicziany observe, "but above all it lends confidence and expands mental horizons. It leads to a more assertive, less compliant, community" (1998: 35). In recognition of this, many movements are instrumental in setting up tuition centres in *cheris*, and in helping poorer members to buy notebooks and uniforms. There is a perception, however, that "those who have studied run off and do not seek to develop the people" (Anandan, DPI activist, 23/03/99). To this end the Dalit Student Federation (one of many such organisations) was established in 1994. The DSF provides educational, financial and pastoral advice to Dalit college students. They encourage students to enrol in degrees that offer firm job prospects, provide tuition classes (DSF members are required to tutor a class for Dalit students at least once a week), and also foster social consciousness and awareness towards the group. Each student, they intend, should help two other Dalits from their area to gain admission to university. They hope, thus, to create a new cadre of educated activists, rather than a sub-stratum of privileged Dalits (DSF AGM 12/01/99). The DSF, however, is focused on further education and the numbers of Dalits whom they can help is limited. The tuition centres and exhortations to educate children are most effective when they come from mass movements operating in *cheris* and slums. The lack of resources means that most movements are unable to run sustained basic education programmes, but educating their members about the importance of literacy is vital to prevent children being withdrawn from school to act as babysitters or to go to work.

³³ The SC literacy rates today are almost exactly those of the Tamil population as a whole in 1981 and literacy appears to growing at the same rate across the population. In 1981, according to the Census, 29

V: CONCLUSION: CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCES OF CASTE

CASTE TODAY: The continuing importance of caste

“The problem”, as Beteille rightly notes, “is not simply why inequalities come into being, but why, despite efforts of many kinds, they refuse to disappear” (Beteille 1991: 20). An analysis of Dalit life in contemporary India has to address the question of why affirmative action programmes, and economic liberalisation, have failed to create an equal society. ‘Untouchability’ is still practised, and the ritual, economic and asset poverty of the Dalits looks set to perpetuate their subordination. This continuing exploitation has fostered awareness amongst Dalits (especially women) of their shared interests. The emancipatory potential of this development, however, is mitigated by a “striking localisation of identity”, and increasing intra-caste differentiation which divides better off Untouchables from their caste-fellows living in less developed streets (Kapadia 1995: 239). Increasing differentiation *within* castes and the formation of solidarity networks *across* caste, thus, are countering the processes of caste substantialisation. The links and disparities between rural and urban areas also need to be assessed if we are to grasp the situation confronting Dalit mobilisation today. As B. Scharma, the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes notes, “the life of the vast majority of our people is linked with three elements, viz.; the right over resources, the right over means of production, and the entitlement for labour” (1990: ii). In urban contexts, according to Kohli (1990), political behaviour can not simply be mapped onto caste and ethnicity. Urban society is commonly assumed to be class-based and secular (V.D'Souza 1985). The impacts of 'modernisation' are concentrated in the urban environment, where the effect of Government denunciations of caste, in conjunction with the anonymity of city life, render it “difficult for residents of urban caste-integrated neighbourhoods to practice open discrimination, or to give caste any marked importance in public” (Dickey 1993:18).³⁴ Having said that, urban residential areas continue to be segregated on the basis of caste, and posters, temples, and other

per cent of Dalits in Tamil Nadu were literate as opposed to 47% of the general population. This is only to be expected as the reservations for SCs only apply to higher education.

³⁴ It is telling in this context that the breakdown of traditional patron-client ties has been countered by a rise in new forms of dependency - on loans, and for work in an environment where unemployment and landlessness are rising. “Transformations”, as Mendelsohn and Vicziany rightly stress, “have left intact a great edifice of discrimination ... but it has been compartmentalised - It provides space for a measure of material and social comfort, and breaks the cycle of relentless subordination” (1998 41/42). “The new civic culture”, as Mendelsohn and Vicziany put it, “is one of pragmatism which allows ample scope for compartmentalization and social hypocrisy” (1998 :126). Thus, even 'modern' Hindus will refuse food in the houses of Scheduled Caste friends, and inter-caste marriages are almost universally frowned upon.

signifiers serve to delineate community boundaries. The opening up of new fields of economic opportunity in the urban context has, however, entailed a degree of independence that is denied to many rural Dalits (Holmström 1984, Robinson 1988, Reiniche 1996). The dependent nature of rural, landless Untouchables, according to Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998: 216), helps to explain the predominantly urban bias of Dalit movements.³⁵

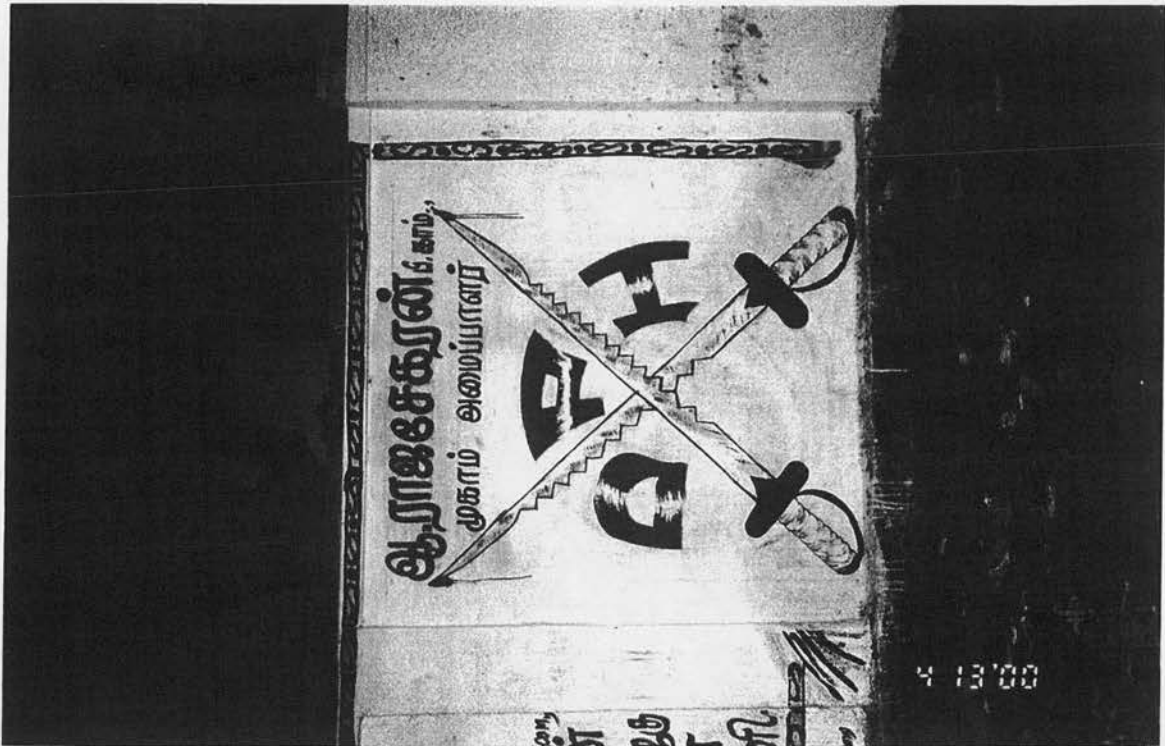
THE ART OF SUBSISTENCE

"If we were to describe the village's economy in a word", Deliège concludes in his study of a Dalit settlement in Tamil Nadu, "it would be that of 'subsistence' or 'poverty'" (1997: 48). The majority of India's Dalits continue to be very poor and struggle to make ends meet, let alone accumulate savings. There has, however, been an increasing class differentiation within castes, and many Dalits have made use of the opportunities offered by the new economic mode of operation and the state to advance economically. These opportunities have also allowed most Dalits to escape from a position of dependency on one caste or landlord. This relative independence has enabled them to reject the ritually and socially degrading tasks that were traditionally assigned to them and assert their humanity (cf. Robinson 1988, Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998, Pai 2000). The provision of education for all, and the weapon of the franchise, has allowed Dalits to escape conditions of servitude but the liberatory potential of literacy still evades the majority of Dalits and should be a prime concern of movements for their uplift. Whilst many educated individuals are denounced for distancing themselves from the Dalit community and attempting to shroud their social origins, the leaders of Dalit movements emerge from this class of people (cf. Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 215-7). Their example is also crucial in persuading other Dalits to aspire towards better positions. In some rural areas Dalits are still tied to local landlords and coerced into the performance of humiliating 'caste work', but such practices are increasingly subject to challenge as Dalits assert themselves on a local level despite their fear of violence.³⁶ At the least, such assertion is evident in the demand for a fair wage in recompense for their labour. Writing in 1973 Epstein noted that "this progressive emancipation is, to be sure,

³⁵ This sense of rural-urban differentiation is captured by Gokhale, in his citation of village elders who feel jeopardised by the revolutionary utterances of city based youth (1990: 238).

³⁶ Frequent reports of caste atrocities testify to the steadfastness of most Dalits who refuse to perform such tasks. According to the Statistical Handbook of the TN Government for 1999, there were 469 villages in Tamil Nadu in 1998 that were either 'Atrocity Prone' or 'Dormant (sic) Atrocity Prone'.

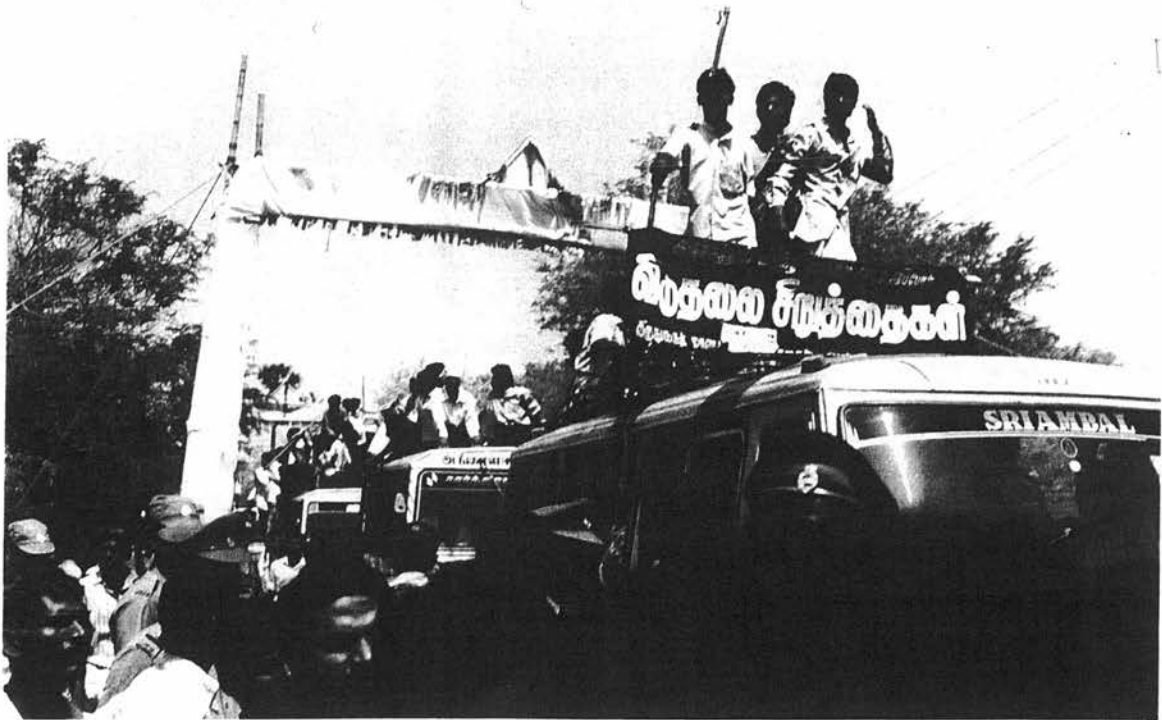
not yet finished, but it is a 'clear tendency' which can be observed in rural India" (1973: 140). Chapter Five examines this progressive emancipation as it is played out in public space. We shall see that the material conditions of untouchability are not only economic but also spatial. As we have seen in this chapter, the liberal state is unable to address the structural conditions of the Untouchables. Those who have freed themselves from servitude, as Epstein noted, do not always improve their own economic position (*ibid.*). Thirty years on the situation has not altered considerably from this assessment, and it would be scant comfort for the Dalits if social liberation were to be "attended by perpetual poverty" (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 270). The increased freedom and opportunities open to the community have, however, increased Dalit participation in social and political life. Such public attention and activism not only increases the confidence and self-esteem of individual Dalits, as Dreze and Sen (1997) note, it may be the ultimate guarantee of governmental initiative (cf. Datta 1998: L2, Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 224).



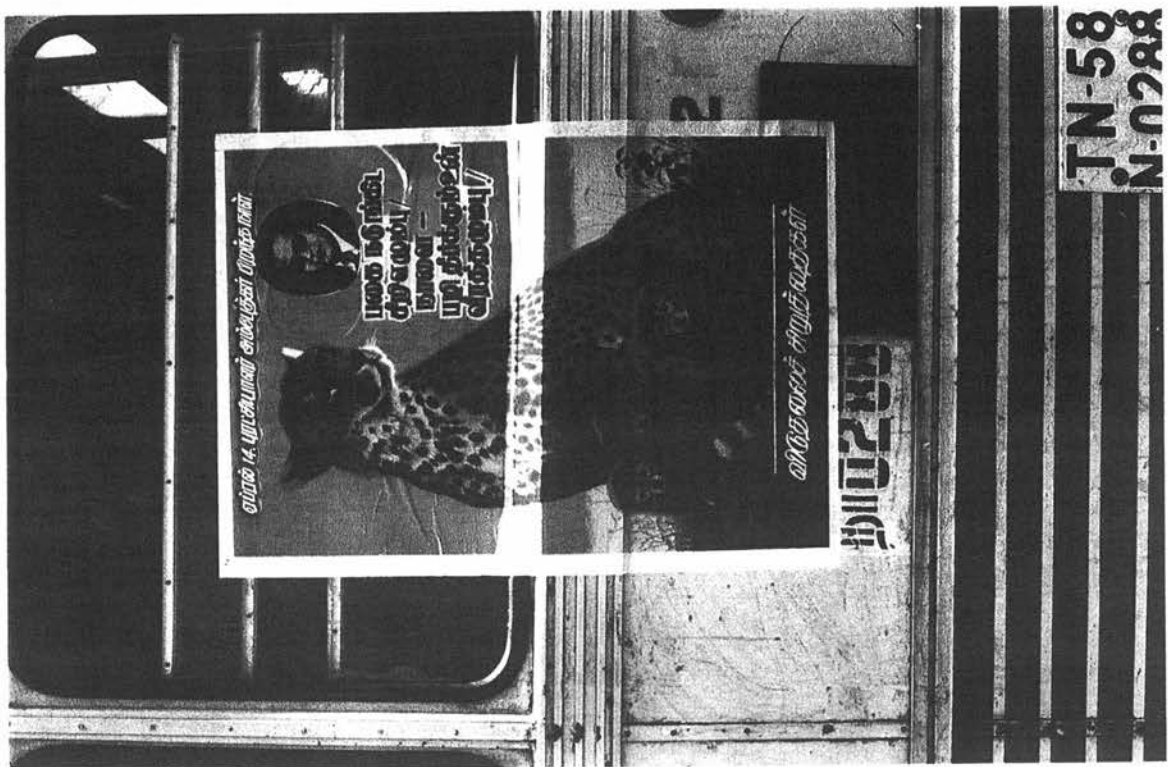
An example of the aggressive graffiti that alienates members of other castes, but pleases the radical youth of the DPI.



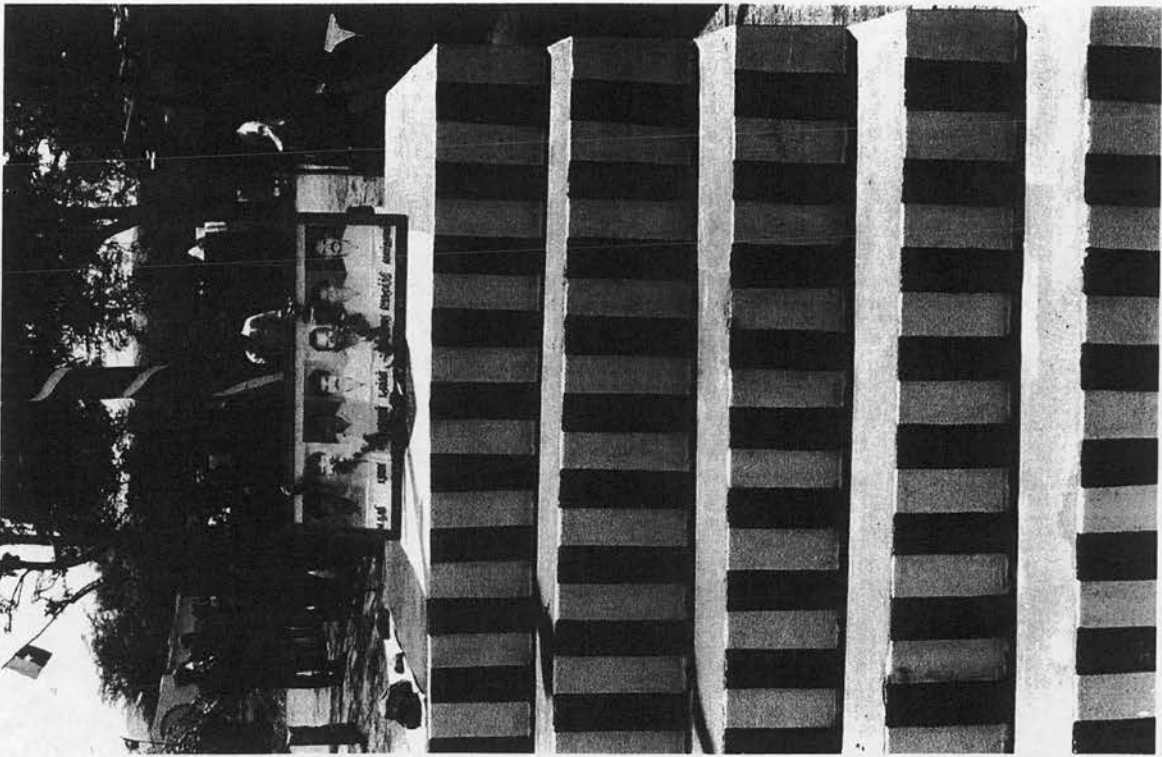
Defaced TMC posters in Chidambaram. The two Dalit leaders in the main poster, Dr.Krishnasamy and Thirumavalavan, have been smeared with cow-dung.



The Liberation Panther convoy arriving in Melavalavu for the Memorial Day. Members often followed the leader in convoys of vehicles to give an indication of strength and enthusiasm.



A poster pasted onto a city bus on April the 14th, to mark Ambedkar's birthday. Such posters usually contained news of a meeting, or condemnation of an atrocity.



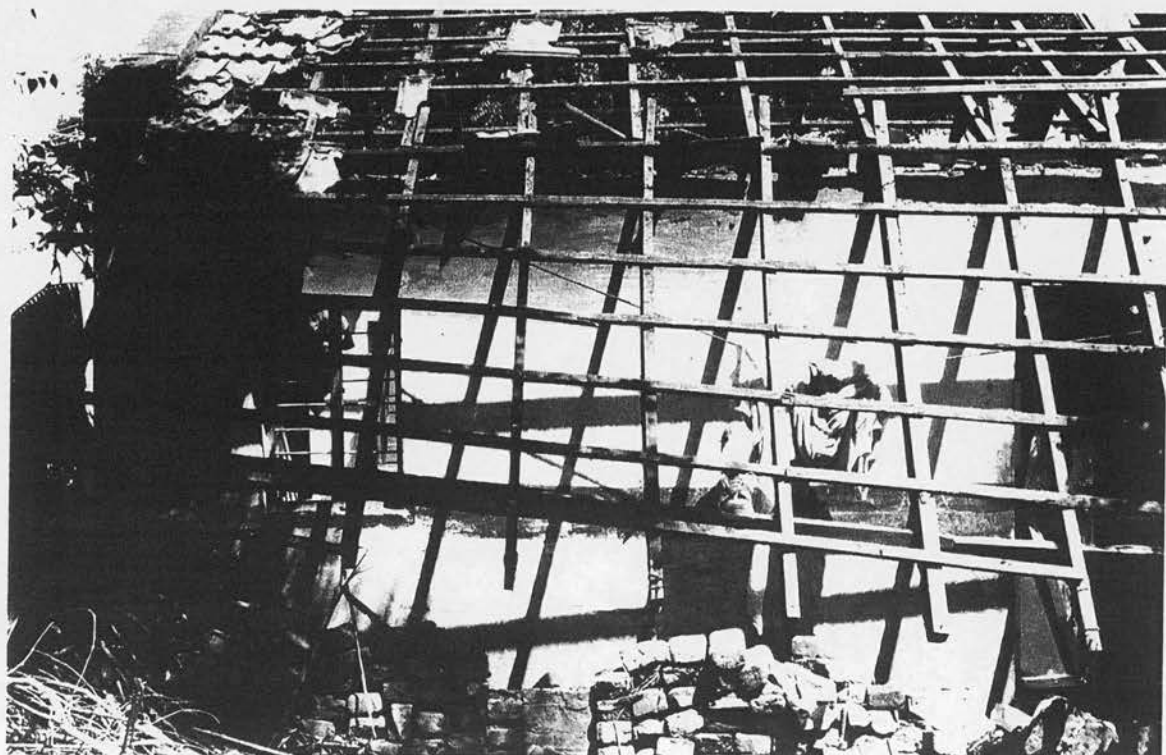
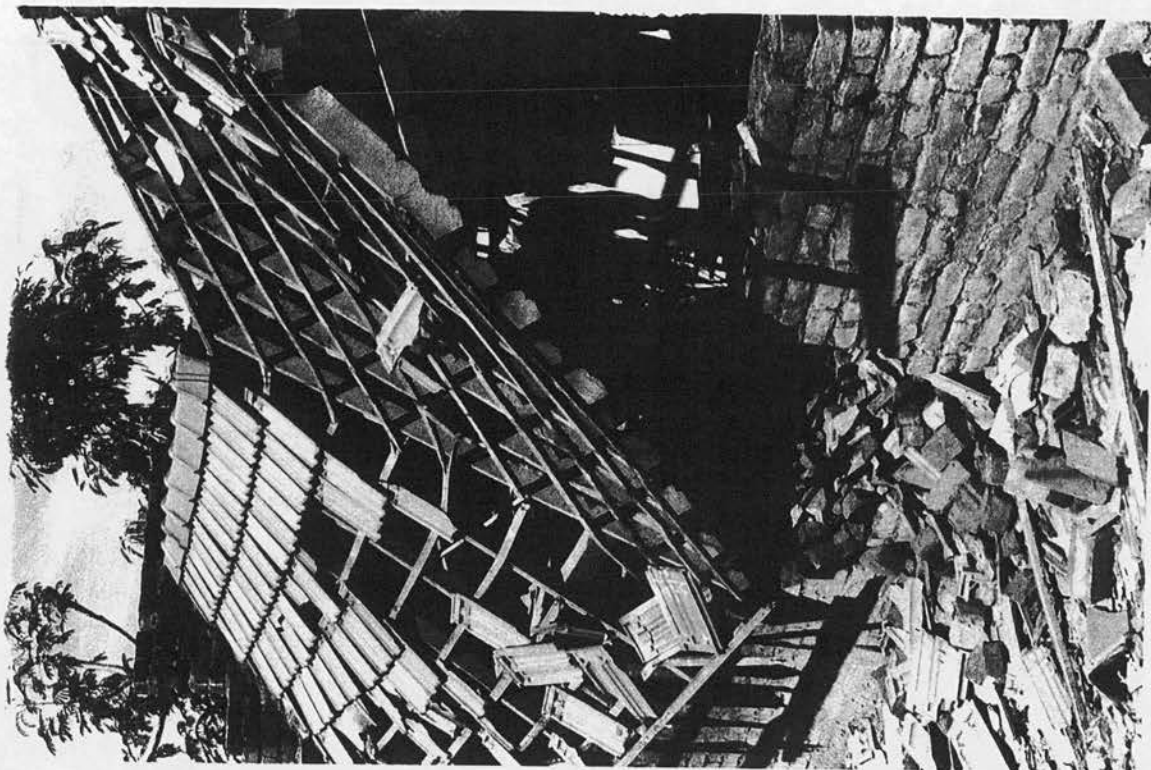
Memorial Day in Melavalavu. Above, the newly installed flagpole of the DPI. Below, a woman places a garland on Murugesan's grave. In 2000, the DPI constructed a large monument in the cheri.



A movement wedding. These occasions are often indistinguishable from political meetings. The picture on the posters is that of Ambedkar and the main name that of Thirumavalavan.



Melavassel on election day. The striking image above the entrance is permanent, but the flags and banners are not. Since then the DPI has abandoned its coalition with the TMC. The flags of the Muslim League indicate the attempt to forge Dalit-Muslim links, but the profusion of DMK symbols show that Melavassel is not united.



The ruins of Dalit houses in Kodankipatti. The houses nearest the main village were worst hit.

CHAPTER FIVE: IDENTITY, SPACE AND POWER

The Spatial Bases and Practices of the DPI

I: SETTING THE SCENE

BOUNDED SPACES, TERRITORY AND MOVEMENT MARKERS

Above the main entrance to the Melavassel Housing Unit, in Madurai, a board has been erected on painted poles. The poles are coloured in light blue, red and white stripes, and the board bears the striking images of a roaring leopard and the face of a man cross cut by bolts of lightning. In between the two images bold lettering spells out the fact that this is a stronghold of the Dalit Panther Iyakkam (Movement – DPI), otherwise known as the Liberation Panthers. The face that stares insolently out at the five star Hotel Tamil Nadu, across the road, is that of Thirumavalavan, the leader of the movement. On either side of the gateway the compound wall has been turned into a series of political meeting points. The slogans and images of the DMK, the AIADMK, the Communists, and the Liberation Panthers vie with Hindu shrines for wall space. Several parties have constructed ramshackle shelters in front of murals depicting their leaders and symbols. These ‘halls’ (*manram*) as they are grandiosely referred to, serve little material function and adherents of the organisations in question tend to congregate elsewhere. The booths only come into their own during moments of political import such as elections, when the canvassers gather with their supporters. Mostly they stand deserted save for a few stray chickens or the pigs that root around for rubbish in inner city India. The bright colours and vivid portraits of leaders and symbols compete for attention with the hoardings that feature film posters or advertisements. These murals are a constant reminder of the presence of the particular organisation in the area and they serve, in this sense, to establish a claim to the territory.

It was when I was visiting people in the house nearest the colony entrance that the significance of these symbols of affiliation became apparent. Two Dalit men approached us in search of assistance. The manager in the hotel where they were working had abused them in caste terms and was making life unbearable. They had recently arrived from the countryside and had no relatives or friends to turn to. Having noticed the board above the entrance, therefore, they had resolved to approach the DPI. In this sense the flags, posters and billboards of various social or political

organisations serve to establish a 'cartography' of political affiliation. No hamlet is too remote to have an array of flag-poles that detail just which organisations are present in the vicinity. These often function as indicators of popularity as well, for the taller the flagpole and the better maintained it is, the stronger a movement or party is in the area. Conversely, the flagpoles of discredited parties may be uprooted and cast aside in the symbolic rejection of their ideals. The first move of any organisation, on establishing itself in a locality, is to haul up its flag on a painted pole or tree stump. More permanent constructions may follow - the flag poles are often made taller or given a concrete plinth with a plaque embedded within it, statues, billboards, and buildings may also be erected - but the immediate impulse is to identify the area with the party or movement in question. Less permanently, such concerns are reflected in the actions of protestors who attempt to lay claim to public space. Coconut matting or canvas *pandals* (marquees) are put up to provide some shelter for the demonstrators, and their emblems and posters serve to identify their organisation and the cause that they espouse. This concern with marking territory highlights the significance of space to Dalit movements.

II: IDENTITY, SPACE & POWER: THE IMPORTANCE OF SPACE

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I wish to explore the significance of public space to Dalit identity and to the functioning of Dalit movements. The purpose of this focus is to examine the social concepts that underlie much Dalit movement action. The notions of 'space' and 'spatiality' are not often verbalised in this context, and yet conflicts over and for space are central to the movements and for the production of identity in general (Massey 1994, Hetherington 1998, Escobar 2001). Space is as much a social construct as a physical entity, and this construction is significant to the processes of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, Lefebvre (1991) argued that each society's versions of space, as manifest in the built environment, exposed a particular ideology or view of the world. Social space, in other words, is enmeshed in relations of power. The oppression of the Dalits is materially manifested in the physical isolation of Dalit *cheris* (Quarters). The notion of space, thus, is a central social idiom of the Dalit struggle. Dalit movements flourish in the impoverished conditions of rural *cheris* and urban slums, where they can draw upon pre-existing networks of affiliation and family ties. They emerge out of local issues and problems and yet the conditions they are fighting against are

familiar across India: landlessness, poverty, low social status, poor working conditions, lack of amenities and facilities, and poor housing conditions.¹ Locally constructed identities, therefore, are “also constructed in relation to processes of classification or categorisation by the state and other social groups” (Aitken 1999: 19. cf. Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 122). The oppression of Dalits by certain Backward Caste communities in Tamil Nadu, for example, has fostered a fragile sense of Dalit unity that transcends the narrow boundaries of each Scheduled Caste (SC) community. The constitutionally created category of ‘SC’, similarly, enables solidarity between Dalits of differing regions, languages, and cultures. Paradoxically the very government programmes designed to alleviate the poverty of the Dalits and provide better conditions for them have often culminated in the reproduction of marginality. A rhetoric of ‘meritocracy’ denies due recognition to the academic and employment achievements of Dalit youth, and the rows of small, single-room, concrete government constructions are as sure a sign of a Dalit settlement as any that existed previously. The communities derived from such ‘colonies’, in Appadurai’s terms, “are context-produced” as much as they are “context-generative” (1995: 217).

These means of controlling and co-ordinating Dalit life offer what Foucault (1980: 72) terms a micro-physical power which works in part by reordering material space. The attempt to eliminate the disorder and dirt of the crowded *cheris* and to impose structural order upon them has not always worked. Dalit movements are increasingly questioning their marginality and demanding recognition as citizens. There is a paradox here, since it is arguable that the identification of a given locality with one particular movement results in the privatisation of that space, and serves to create an enclave cut off from the rest of society. Social and political action, however, “militates in the long run against separatism because it assumes an orientation that is *publicist*. In so far as these arenas are *publics* they are by definition not enclaves – which is not to say that they are not often involuntarily enclaved” (Mitchell 1995: 124). When Dalit movements raise their flags above the entrance to an urban housing block, or unveil a painted board in the heart of a Dalit village, therefore, they are

¹ Many of the grievances raised are local ones and relate to specific incidents, but they are accorded a wider currency due to the universality of *cheri* conditions. “The economic network of caste-based institutions”, as Fernandes and Bhatkal note, “is awesome. A huge number of hospitals, schools, colleges, co-operative banks and other ‘modern’ institutions are controlled by a thinly veiled caste

raising fundamental questions about the nature of public space and social interaction. Dalits, movement activists often asserted, have been 'confined in *cheris*' for too long. Isolated, excluded and ostracised they constituted a 'non-people' who were not accepted as being members of the 'Hindu public', but were perceived as 'outcastes' on the fringes of civilised society (cf. Ludden 1989: 174, Price 1996: 133-4).² By struggling over and within the social spaces from which they have traditionally been excluded, Dalit movements are engaged in a negotiation of both their own identity and of the limits and possibilities of civil society in India. Examining the Dalit movements in spatial terms, therefore, provides an indication of the state of Indian democracy.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE AND SPACE

Considerations of place and space have long been important in India. "What is your native place (*Sontha oor*)", is one of the most frequently asked questions when one meets someone for the first time. Answering that one comes from Madurai, or some other urban conglomeration, is rarely perceived as an adequate response and the questioner will probe deeper: "No, but originally (by which they mean the native village of the parents) where are you from?" Alternatively: "which part of Madurai do you live in?" By thus mapping the background of their new acquaintances, people build up a sense of the person's identity. Until the early twentieth century, endogamous marriage networks rarely extended beyond the immediate locale of the native village. Even today networks of relatives and friends tend to be localised around one's place of settlement. Over time these spatial divisions have come to be associated with strong cultural identities through processes of local negotiation, and in interaction with the British colonialists (Ram 1991: 4, Irschick 1994: 67, 104, Subramanian 1999: 18).³ Four factors, as Mines observes, contribute to the overriding significance of locality to communities and individuals: "1. Locality based marriage

institutions" (1999: 5). Dalits feel excluded by this network of caste interests, and bemoan their own community's lack of cohesion and organisation.

² In his history of the peasantry in South India, Ludden notes that the British administration bought into the idea that the Untouchables were lesser citizens: "When roads needed to be built, public works officers justified their coercion of Pallas (sic.) by citing the *public right to Palla manpower*, a right which they extrapolated from village to government (1989: 174. Emphasis added).

³ Each of the various caste and community groups in Tamil Nadu, as Irschick notes, "claimed a special (often 'original') site in the landscape and fashioned a cultural representation of the area that flowed from this construction" (1994: 67). Tamil Nadu is said to consist of five socio-emotive regions, or 'tinais', (mountains, forest or pasture, countryside, seashore, and wasteland) each of which had its own character (Ram 1991, Irschick 1994).

rules, 2. The roles that personalised trust and connections (including kinship ties) continue to play as determinants of social and economic success, 3. The community-making roles that big-men play, and 4. The presence of 'charitable' community institutions" such as temples and schools (Mines 1994: 119). The Untouchables were, and in some cases still are, further tied to a locality through bonds of patronage and the threat of violence. Although British 'emancipation laws' (1843 & 1860) legally permitted the Untouchables to carry their labour wherever they chose, "once the state ceased to be segmentary, peasants could no longer engage in rituals of flight" (Irschick 1994: 193).

The sedentary nature of the Untouchables, therefore, had more to do with the economic and social compulsions of the *jajmani* system than any real exercise of choice, but the writings of British missionaries and administrators enabled them to place a different gloss on their immobility. As early as 1818, F.W.Ellis of the Indian Administrative Service noted that the Paraiyars of Tondaimandalam "affect to consider themselves as the real proprietors of the soil" (in Irschick 1994: 182). The claim to be the 'original' inhabitants of the land has a deep-rooted appeal that finds an echo in the speeches of movement activists today. The poor conditions of Dalit settlements are magnified when contrasted with the supposed 'golden age' when the Dalits tilled their own land and were their own masters. This sense of grievance is most apparent in the struggle to reclaim the land ceded to Dalits by the British.⁴ *Panchama Nilam* (Dalit Land) was supposed to be the inalienable 'possession of the habitually dispossessed', and a means of alleviating the poverty of the Scheduled Castes. The initial act in 1891 prohibited the sale, gift or transfer of this land into non-Dalit hands but very little of this land is occupied by Dalits today, and that little has been the subject of fierce struggles and bloodshed. Land ownership is a politically charged issue in the struggle over space.⁵ So long as the Dalits are denied land ownership in rural settings they are likely to remain dependent upon the other castes for work (cf. previous chapter). Where Dalits do own land their economic and

⁴ The significance of the fact that the Dalits were largely landless was not lost on the British administrators such as Sub-Collector Mullally. In his report of 1889 he notes that a lack of land "renders these unfortunates nothing more than the slaves of the mirasidars who exact from them labour for nothing or at a much lower than market rates" (in Irschick 1994: 171).

⁵ "Is this land not ours?" as Thirumavalavan demanded at one demonstration. "The downtrodden want the right to walk on common paths, they want rights to common assets, and they want rights to the lands that are given out for lease" (Madurai: 13/07/1999).

educational position has risen accordingly, and they are given greater social respect. "The Dalit's struggle for land and water", as Kadirvelu points out, "is integral to the struggle for liberation from all forms of oppression in the caste society. This struggle for common resources should not only be viewed from an economic perspective, it also has a social dimension" (1998: 3). Important as it is, land is merely one aspect of the wider struggle for recognition as equal citizens and unfettered access to public space.

SACRED SPACES AND PROFANE PUBLICS

Material space is extremely important in the everyday lives of Indian villagers. The inferiority of the Dalit community is highlighted in their exclusion from common areas in the village, and in the (higher caste) village committee's refusal to collect taxes from them for the village festival. The sub-division of space, into sacred and profane areas, further serves to separate the Dalits from the rest of the community by denying them access to temples. In a historical study of social mobility amongst the low-caste Nadars during the 1890's, Good (1999) charts the conflicts over access to public space. Whereas temple authorities claimed that they owned the surrounding streets and could prohibit impure groups from using them, the Nadars challenged this assertion in the British courts by insisting that the streets in question were public roads which people of all castes could use (cf. Ludden 1989: 188-96). The ownership or control of land and public resources, it is clear, affords power and status to the occupant. Therefore important villagers receive special indications of their significance. The image of the village god will stop at their houses when it is being chaired round the village for example; or they will be accorded prominent places near the front at any communal event. Space, thus, is a very important symbol in Hindu life (cf. Ludden 1989: 30).

Lowliness and wrongdoing is similarly marked in spatial terms. Disobeying moral codes or the demands of the village committee may lead to social exclusion and ultimately exile. Couples who break the caste taboo may be allowed to live in peace, but they are rarely allowed to remain in the village. Transgressors are removed from the boundaries of the village lest their example should prove to be a bad influence. Individual Dalits who challenge the power of the village council, such as the panchayat presidents in Melavalavu and Maruthankudi, may be hounded out of the

village, threatened, beaten or even killed.⁶ In considering the importance of spatiality, space and power, therefore, we need to address several issues. Firstly we must recognise how multiple elements of individual identity are manifested in various spaces. One can, for example, be a Dalit, a council worker, a woman and a mother. These multiple identities influence the way one behaves or is treated in different settings and at different times. Secondly, we need to examine the social relations (and relations of production) which shape the course of people's protest, and the spaces within which such protest occurs. Dalits in small rural communities, for instance, are less likely to challenge the status quo or refuse to accept the daily indignities they suffer since they are dependent on the higher castes for work. In conclusion then we can consider how much the rise in consciousness and protest are suggestive of a reordering of power relations. This focus, of necessity, requires an analysis of power relations both on a social *and* on a political level.

III. PROTEST IN PUBLIC SPACE & PUBLIC SPHERE

PUBLIC SPHERE

At issue in the Dalit struggle are questions concerning the nature of both 'public space' and the 'public sphere', and the position of Dalits within them. The emergence of the public sphere is depicted as an offshoot of the process of modernisation and the transformation of feudal societies into modern, capitalist nation-states (Price 1996, Mitchell 1995, Habermas 1994, 1996). The 'public sphere' is described as the 'realm' in which communication occurs: "a network for communicating information and points of view" (Habermas 1996: 360). The term indicates a transition from traditional authority to a new form of social relationship and mode of organisation based upon consensual authority. Under the monarchical system 'state' and 'society'

⁶ On July 19, 2000, the Hindu newspaper reported the case of the Dalit president of Maruthankudi village panchayat in Madurai district. The traditionally Thevar panchayat was brought under the 'reserved list' in 1996. This meant that only a Dalit candidate could stand for election. Having forced the cancellation and postponement of previous elections through force, the village committee finally issued a dictat that everybody should vote for Mr. V. Nagar. Nagar was duly elected with Thevar support, but he was immediately forced to tender his resignation with a plea to the state government to strike the village off the reserved list. The dispute dragged on and the council was unable to function, but Nagar was prevailed upon to sign some forms authorising the payment of panchayat employees. As soon as the committee came to know of his actions they "called Nagar a cheat and accused him of misusing the money". "When the threats increased", the article continues, "Nagar fled the village with his family. 'It is better for him and for us if he keeps away from the village,' said a villager". Two other villages in the same district face similar problems, and it was just such a dispute that culminated in the massacre at Melavalavu. Source: <http://www.the-hindu.com/2000/07/19/stories/04192234.htm>. See Pai (2001) for an analysis of panchayat elections and problems in Uttar Pradesh.

interpenetrated each other to such an extent as to preclude the emergence of a 'public' (Price 1996: 132-3). Colonial rule resulted in the spread of a new political order which inscribed the social world with new conceptions of space, new forms of social relation, and new forms of person-hood (Mitchell 1988: ix, Ludden 1989: 190, Price 1996: 41-2, Kaviraj 1997: 25).⁷ Under the British, formal Kingly rule was gradually disbanded and standardised laws were introduced that, theoretically at least, treated everyone as equals. Democracy in complex societies, according to Melucci, is predicated upon the "creation of conditions which allow social actors to recognise themselves and be recognised for what they are or what they want to be" (1996: 219. cf. Chandhoke 2001: 20). Habermas (1996) recognised the difficulty of transferring from one mode of governance to another, and foresaw an incremental transition of the public from its initial condition as a 'collective subject' into the position where it could constitute the conscious collective sovereign of itself. The public sphere, according to such formulations, is a universal, abstract realm (Mitchell 1995: 117). It comprises of the constitutional rights to freedom of association and expression, the right to protest, the courts, media and public institutions that all provide a metaphorical space for representation, recognition and communication. It is mistaken, however, to infer the existence of an open and politically active civil society from the number of civil institutions as liberal political theory does. This ignores the fact that subordinate groups lack the material means to guarantee equal access to, and equal participation in, the public sphere (Chandhoke 2001: 10). In actually existing democracies some groups are always excluded (Fraser 1990). It was an admission of this inequality that led the authors of independent India's constitution to create a system of opportunities and reservations aimed at incorporating the most excluded of its citizens into the body of society.

Despite these provisions, as we have seen, many Dalits are still marginalised. They are discriminated against in the hindrances they face on free passage through a village, at teashops (where they are sometimes served in different glasses) and in the unequal distribution of the proceeds from common resources such as mangroves.

⁷ With reference to an incident in which the higher castes of a village objected to the passage of an Untouchable's corpse through their streets, Ludden notes that the Government saw it as "a matter of principle that the state should define rules concerning the use of public space" (1989: 188). As a result of local disputes such as this the collective control of elites over the use of space was eroded to produce "truly public space" (1989: 190).

“These restrictions are extended to the use of public properties. The Dalits are forbidden to draw water if there is only one well meant for drinking. They are not allowed to sit at the *chavadi* (meeting place), but have to squat on the ground” (Jeyaharan 1992: 44). Despite an ideology of citizenship in India, to paraphrase Shklar (1991), the history of citizenship has been one of exclusion. Hundreds of Dalits were prevented from voting in the 1999 elections in Tamil Nadu, and many Dalit politicians at the panchayat level have been prevented from carrying out their duties (see Chapter 9 and footnote 6 below). This demonstrates the difficulty of translating the spaces theoretically made available in the public sphere into material spaces where marginalised groups can speak, and be recognised as citizens. Whereas the public *sphere* is abstract, in other words, public *space* is material; “It constitutes an actual site, a place, a ground within and from which political activity flows” (Mitchell 1995: 117). It is somewhat unclear, however, what public space actually is. It may refer to the concrete, physical spaces of the built environment or the experiential space of social relations (Weintraub 1995: 281). “Is it, as the US Supreme Court recognises, simply those spaces in cities (and elsewhere) that are publicly owned and have ‘always’ been used by citizens to gather and communicate political ideas” (Mitchell 1996a: 127)? If so, then there are few areas in India that constitute a public space in any meaningful sense since space has usually been hierarchically patterned. To what extent can caste-Hindu villages be regarded as public spaces, considering the social exclusion of Dalits from these areas? According to Massey’s (1994) notion of ‘power geometry’ “a place is made unique by its own particular ‘constellation of relations’ ... that is, the unique combination of economic, political, and social links with other places” (Cope 1996: 180). The positioning of Dalit *cheris* is significant, because in most rural areas they are located on the edges of caste Hindu villages and are placed in a position of dependence upon them for work, water and other amenities. The question ‘what is public space’, however, ultimately derives its significance from the boundaries between the public and the private.

PUBLIC WORLD AND PRIVATE HOMES

In ‘Filth and the Public Sphere’, Kaviraj (1997a) challenges the applicability of the public/private dichotomy to India. “The idea of the public”, as he asserts, “is a particular configuration of commonness that emerged in the capitalist-democratic West in the course of the 18th Century” (1997a: 86). The idea of universal access was

not present in traditional India, where one's social attributes served to determine one's level of access to 'hierarchical space'. Drawing upon Tagore, Kaviraj suggests that a more apt differentiation would be between 'Home and the World', the inside and the outside. His contention is that the collective nature of Indian households renders them very much the reverse of 'private', because they are not driven by the desire of individuals to be accorded their own space. There is, however, a gendered differentiation of space within the home. It is often argued that Dalit women experience greater autonomy than their higher caste counterparts due to their earning potential. The sequestering of women in the home, as Kaviraj notes, is very much a middle class and middle caste way of life. Dalit women suffer less from such social restrictions than their caste Hindu counterparts (cf. Racine and Racine 1998, Rajuladevi 2000). This does not exempt from the general notions of propriety and good conduct which serve to restrict women to the home. It is, as Sharma observes, "difficult for a woman to engage in public, political or economic processes which involve contact with unrelated men since it is her business to withdraw from such situations" (1980: 213). Dalit women may work, shop and collect fuel and water but they are not permitted to linger unnecessarily in the public streets or frequent tea-stalls. Thus, as Mitchell (1988: 50), observes, space itself is polarised between the female domestic realm and the public, male world of the market place.

GENDERED SPACE

Sharma (1980: 220) draws a distinction between the *bazaar*, which constitutes public space within the village, and the *jungle*, which represents the public spaces and wastelands beyond the village boundaries. Women assert their right to enter this space through their participation in rallies and demonstrations, and yet they simultaneously embody the persistent division between the public and the private spheres. When higher castes want to 'get even' with assertive Dalits they frequently abuse or rape Dalit women. Where women enter public spaces, they are often responsible to their families for their reputation and honour, and fear for their reputations (Sharma 1981: 218, Ravindran 1999: WS35, Subadra 1999: WS28). Opposed to this dangerous public space is domestic or private space, which is seen as the secure province of women, despite the frequency of domestic violence (Subadra 1999: WS28). Even the home, as Sharma notes, is "zoned into private, semi-private and semi-public areas", with the women largely confined to the kitchen. This represents the epitome of

domestic space to which access is restricted (1980: 227). This spatial division is also a temporal one, which varies with the time, season, and the demands of the labour market (Mitchell 1988: 55). Movement activists gathering at houses in Melavassel would congregate in the semi-public area of the porch, seated on beds or chairs, whilst the women served tea and sometimes food. The differences between the 'home and the world', therefore, fail to fully replace the opposition between the public and the private. These categories do, however, serve to highlight the differences in socio-cultural organisation that pertain in India. The significance of substituting the word 'home' for the word 'private' with regard to the Dalits is most apparent when it is applied to extended kin and near neighbours as well as family. The *cheri* or the urban slum, thus, may be understood to function as a partial extension of the domicile. If we define the term 'home' primarily as "a realm of security" such an interpretation is certainly justified in a way that the term 'private' is not. The Dalit women of Kodankipatti and their peers in Melavassel draw strength, friendship, and solidarity from their neighbours, but they can be systematically subjected to violence within the privacy of their own homes (Ravindran 1999, Subadra 1999). Community links are more important than the superficial ties between neighbours since they are reinforced by the ties of caste and kinship (if only fictitious). The 'home', according to this definition constitutes a sort of semi-public space between the private lives of individuals and the public life of the street. Integral to the Dalit movement's struggle is an implicit challenge to hierarchical and gendered space. The mobilisation of women activists serves to break down the habitual barriers on female movement. Protest meetings often occur in far away, public places where women are subject to the attention of unfamiliar men. Whilst men and women generally sit apart in such meetings, and women almost always travel together rather than alone, they are increasingly gaining in confidence. Most Dalit meetings are now addressed by female speakers, who have not only transgressed restrictions on movement, but also have the courage to make themselves heard in public, and predominantly male, space.

POLITICAL PUBLIC SPACE

Space is not merely passive, it "*is both constructed by and the medium of social relations and processes*" (Cope 1996: 185). Citizenship and Social Movements, therefore, must occupy and reconfigure material public spaces if they are to have an impact. "Indeed, these movements are premised on the notion that democratic (and

certainly revolutionary) politics are impossible without the simultaneous creation and control of material space” (Mitchell 1995:123, cf. Escobar 2001: 156). Social relations, as Massey (1994: 168) observes, “always have a spatial form”. The spaces occupied by Dalit *cheris* serve as more than just homes and neighbourhoods, they constitute sites in which the Dalits can be seen and represented, but also controlled and contained.⁸ They are also, increasingly, places within which activism can arise and expand outward into the wider community. In this process movements need not lose their specificity, since public space represents the “point of contact between political institutions and collective demands between the functions of government and the representation of conflicts” (Melucci 1996: 221). This recognition of public space as *political* space serves to highlight the interconnectedness of spaces, and the ‘topography of power’ that links them together (Gupta and Ferguson 1999: 8, Escobar 2001: 163). It also highlights the fact that space cannot be conceptualised independently of time. Space is created by and through dynamic social relations and is, by its very nature, “full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation” (Massey 1994: 265). Dalit, Women’s, Non-Brahmin, and Independence movements have all been engaged in struggles to gain entrance to and recognition in public space as political actors. “Here public spaces serve not simply to *surface* particular pre-given behaviours, but become an *active medium* through which new identities are *created or contested*” (Ruddick 1996: 135). It is only in public space that specific movements and identities can encounter and negotiate with other groups. Social space, thus, is deeply constitutive of a sense of community - regulations over who is allowed in, who is excluded, and the roles that both the insiders and the outsiders play help to shape a community’s perception of itself. In this sense, representations of public space are central to the process of ‘other-ing’ (Ruddick 1996: 146). Complex societies are splintered into innumerable ‘publics’ and ‘counter-publics’, each of which annexe their own areas and arenas of discussion. Without spaces in which these counter-publics can be seen and recognised by other factions, therefore, the ‘public’ may be “balkanised” into innumerable ‘home territories’ (Mitchell 1995: 124, Chandhoke 2001: 19).

⁸ “Visibility”, as Foucault observed, “is a trap” (1977: 200).

POLICED PLACES, PUBLIC SPACES

Public space implies accessibility and the potential to bring people with different values, views and opinions into proximity with each other. In the competing definitions of public space, activists promote a vision of a space distinguished by the absence of coercion and the possibility of free interaction and expression. For others, however, public space should constitute a regulated and orderly retreat where properly behaved people can gather without the fear of being harassed (Mitchell 1995: 115, Siegel 1995: 371). This difference between 'public' and 'regulated' space highlights the political significance of space. The first of these visions is a radical affirmation of political space, open to all comers and all discussion even at the possible risk of some social disorder. The latter is a conservative, orderly and planned notion of space, in which access is limited to people deemed capable of acting responsibly in the political community. According to this formulation citizenship is something that is earned, and it can be removed if individuals or groups fail to meet their responsibilities. This raises questions about who the 'public' is, and of who regulates access to 'public spaces'. "The metaphorical spaces between the legal and moral meanings of citizenship", as Staeheli and Thompson note, "set the conditions for debates over which citizens should have access to public space" (1997: 30). Public space in the light of this definition is far removed from the idealistic notions of the emancipated public sphere in which the public governs itself.

Imposing limits and controls on spatial use and public social interaction has been one of the principle means by which government administrators and corporate urban planners have attempted to regulate public behaviour (Siegel 1995: 371). The increasing 'privatisation' of public space (though in so different ways), by capital, by homeless people, and by locality based social movements has created a world in which it is arguable that the "ideal of an unmediated *political* public space is wholly unrealistic" (Mitchell 1995: 121). Kaviraj (1997a) details how the gradual occupation of Calcutta's parks by the lower classes highlighted the difference between *public* space – open to all citizens, and beautifully maintained – and *pablik* space which came to mean areas which were not private property and could, therefore, be encroached upon. The creation of *pablik* space represents a consequence of democratisation, since the lower classes would have been debarred from such spaces before, but this invasion of territory ironically resulted in the loss of public space for

the 'invaders' as well as the city's other inhabitants. Many analysts now posit the mass media - with its talk shows and debates - as the common places in which contemporary society can replicate the idealised forums of public debate such as the Greek Agora. It is certainly true that protest in modern democracies has largely been concerned with initiating public debate (Klimova 2000: 258). In a distorted public sphere, however, access to the media is skewed in favour of the powerful, and compromises and solutions reached through such debates merely serve to reinforce the status quo. The term 'public service broadcasting' connotes the use of news and information media in the best interests of the public, but control over such media is rarely democratic and not all views can find expression through such channels (Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 204). Even assuming that the mass media was open to different currents of opinion and social debate, the reach of such media in non-literate or poor societies is such that it would disenfranchise the poorer sectors of society. "Without the occupation of material space" therefore, "the kinds of protest that came to a point at Tiananmen ... would have remained invisible" (Mitchell 1995: 123).

IV. DALIT DWELLINGS, DOMAINS & DREAMS CASTE, CHERIS, & CONSCIOUSNESS

Metaphorically situated beyond the four Varna, Tamil Dalits are usually physically located beyond the boundaries of the main village or *oor*. Often deprived of a paved approach road or other modern amenities such as electricity, piped water, toilets, hospitals or schools, *cheris* play an important part in moulding the consciousness, expectations and opinions of their inhabitants. Reprimands, ostracism, and occasional beatings are administered by locally dominant castes to ensure that Dalit children learn the limits within which they must remain. When Dalits recall their own awakening in consciousness, they invariably refer back to some childhood episode in which they were reproved for transgressing the bounds of acceptability. Typical of these was Palanivelu Swamy, the SC/ST State Secretary of the BJP, who recounted several stories about his realisation of caste consciousness:

During the rainy season I was wearing some expensive new chappals. On my way home, a pot was overflowing at the tap so I moved it aside in order to wash my feet. When the lady who owned the pot returned she immediately gave me a big slap. Having hit me she said: 'Why you dog! Harijan dog, Parai' dog! You deign to come here with shoes on your feet

*and wash your feet here? Go to the pond and wash them you *****'. Saying which she hit me again. But the tap water was not 'good water' (purified) it was 'salt water', and whoever comes there can use it. I was 13 at that stage and somewhat mature so I would not have washed my feet otherwise. So, the reason why she hit me was that a Harijan boy had come wearing chappals, there was not any wrong on my side.*

[Interviewed 10/04/99].

He also recounted punishments for other minor transgressions of village rules. The fact that he was thirteen at the time is less surprising when one considers the social segregation that usually obtains in such settings, the constitutional provisions against untouchability and the fact that his village is relatively close to the metropolis of Madurai. Edwin, born and bred in Madurai, recalls his first realisation of being an 'other' came in the first year of his A-levels (Plus One), when all those receiving scholarships had to stand up. Although the criteria of the award remained unknown the implication was that the recipient was from a low caste.

VILLAGES AND VIOLENCE

Exclusion from society and exclusion from material space are mutually reinforcing; without connections and influence it is hard to get things done, and without land or money it is hard to gain these links. To understand the significance of the Dalit movements and the symbolic importance of the emblems of assertion, therefore, the social roots of protest must first be examined. "The Untouchables, as very impure servants", Dumont points out, "are segregated outside the villages proper" (1980: 47). Traditionally they could not use the same wells or enter the same temples, nor could they enter the main village without permission of some kind. Even when summoned to the houses of their upper caste patrons, they are obliged to make their way to the back of the house and then call out to the inhabitants to make their presence known. "Untouchables enter the system", as Deliège puts it, "in order to accomplish their ritual and economic obligations ... they leave it again to go back to their colonies" (1997:119). Any unwarranted incursion into the village proper results in verbal or even physical abuse. "The cultural geography of the Indian village", as P. Sainath observes, is "carefully laid out to assign to Dalit dwellings the lowliest and least desirable areas – the southern outskirts believed to be the abode of Yama, the God of death; the tail end of the irrigation systems; close to the most polluting areas; or on the

fringes of deserts” (in Devi 2000: 50). Even where there is no distinct *cheri* the divisions between the Dalit residences and those of the other castes are quite apparent and are rigidly enforced. As these divisions have been subjected to challenge a pattern has emerged, in which an assertion of equality and consciousness on behalf of the Dalits is met by fierce repression and social ostracism (Vincentnathan 1996, Chowdhry 1998, Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998, Jeffrey 2000).

Viralipatti is a small village in Nilakottai Taluk about 50 km west of Madurai. In 1993, the Dalit Liberation Movement established a branch here and began educating the minority Dalit population about their rights. Subsequent to this development the Dalits, who had to perform the menial duties of whitewashing, cleaning and drumming, demanded the right to enter the temple during the local village festival held in May. They appealed to local government officials, the press and other bodies but met with no success. When they tried to enter the temple forcibly on the 22nd of May 1993, they were repulsed with severe violence. Subsequent to this, the caste Hindus imposed a social boycott on the Dalits and demanded that the local DLM leader Muthaiyah should be handed over to the village committee. When the Dalits refused to co-operate their houses were attacked and men, women and children beaten severely. Similar incidences occurred in Themnavur in 2000 (Athreya & Chandra 2000), Kodankipatti in 1990 and 1999, in Allalaberi in 1990, in Indirapuram, Errampatti and Mudakathan in 1991, in Chinthalapatti and Kunnuvaaran in 1995 (TTS Annual Reports 1992-3, 1991-2, 1995-6). The catalogue of casteist abuse follows a line of what Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998: 53) refer to as ‘exaggerated revenge’. A social boycott means that Dalits are barred from entering the streets where high caste Hindus live or from using common water sources. Local shops are told not to provide them with provisions, barbers refuse to serve them, and local employers are told to use outside labour. Furthermore any Dalit livestock may be seized if it wanders onto caste Hindu land.

ONGOING OPPRESSION

Affirmative action programmes, and the economic uplift of a section of the Dalit community have rendered the higher castes more jealous of their own position. Retaliation against ‘uppity’ Dalits is rising as the dominant castes attempt to maintain their position (Vincentnathan 1996, Chowdhry 1999). Whereas Dalit movements have

sought access to the public realm and political recognition, the increasingly assertive movements of Backward Caste groups such as the Thevars and the Vanniyars have been concerned with denying the benefits of full citizenship to the Dalits, and of excluding them from public spaces. In 1985, for example, when the first Dalit graduate from a village in Madurai District walked home at the end of the term he passed through the upper-caste area of his village wearing shoes and trousers. Perceiving this to be a challenge to their authority certain backward caste youths set upon him and beat him to death. Similarly, a Dalit youth was beaten to death for accidentally brushing against a Thevar lad in the cinema. In 1995, a young schoolgirl who 'presumed' to use the common drinking receptacle in the classroom, was beaten by her teacher. This latter story only made the news headlines, because the ruler used to admonish the child gouged out one of her eyes (Rao 1995).

The intent in each of these cases is apparent. The Dalits are to be kept in their place, and that place is deemed to be beyond the boundaries of society. Such stories are common, though not all such cases are necessarily violent. Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998: 41) note the increasing 'compartmentalisation' of untouchability. In 1972, for instance, in the village of Orathur Dalits were not allowed to use the common village pond. If they wanted water from the reservoir they had to ask caste Hindus to pour it into their vessels. In an attempt to bring a prosecution the Dalits planned to photograph this practice. The caste Hindus forestalled their action by declaring that the pond was common property for all, but since then "they see it as polluted and do not use it" (Kadirvelu 1998: 124). Likewise, where Dalits have gained legal admittance into temples and teashops, the higher castes have frequently responded by building their own private places of worship or tea drinking. Caste prejudice and bias is deep rooted and persistent. Although professional Dalits may be educated, erudite, clean and even vegetarian they are still seen as polluted as a result of their birth. When B.Prasad, a Dalit judge in the Allahabad High Court retired, his successor insisted on cleansing the chamber with water from the Ganga before assuming office (Raj 1998: 149). More commonly, college students speak of 'good friends' whose houses they are not invited to, and whose villages they cannot visit. In the village of Kodankipatti, Balasubramaniam insisted that one of his college mates was foremost in the attack on the *cheri*, and that friendships could not survive the transition back to the village.

COMMON SPACES, CONTROLLED ACCESS

Women in Kodankipatti spoke movingly of the difficulties and daily insults that they faced. They told me that the caste-Hindus prevented Dalits from gaining access to the common pond (*kanmai*), thus depriving them of their bathing and washing space, and toilet area. Given the propensity of Indian toilets to malfunction most people prefer to use the surrounding bushes and wastelands even when the government buildings are provided with such a facility. This means that villagers, especially women, are only able to go to the toilet in peace after sunset and before sunrise. In times of animosity between high castes and the Dalits, the threat of sexual violence makes the experience even more uncomfortable for the women. The use of wastelands or common property to build shanty-towns, or to go to the toilet may be said to 'privatise' the area in the sense that it becomes a place for 'private activities'. By boycotting Dalits from this land, however, the higher castes are able to assert their power and claim the use of public space for themselves. The Dalits of Kodankipatti were, to all intents and purposes, reduced to inhabiting the small area of land around their houses. When they challenged this confinement and tried to show a film in the public square of the village they started off a train of disputes that resulted in their precipitous flight from the village three months later. Goss (1996) observes the essential ambivalence of marketplaces as public spaces. They are private or government property, and yet at the same time they present spaces for politics and debate. This ambivalence was reflected in a dispute between the Dalits of Kodankipatti and the Kounders who form the dominant caste in the village.

A week after the film incident, the Dalits protested about the weekly market that is held in the same venue. Given that it is being held on public space, the Dalits argued, we should be consulted and we should receive a share of the profits. By asserting their right to a share of the proceeds the Dalits were claiming the village-square as public space – as a space to which they had equal rights and where they could encounter members of other communities. Their demands were rejected by a dominant caste that used its monopoly on the sources of employment, provisions and space to exclude the Dalits. "Public space", as Mitchell puts it, "is always and inescapably a product of social negotiation and contest" (1996a: 131). The process of negotiation, however, does not occur between equals. The Peace Committees that were organised by the

local administration to facilitate discussion between the opposing factions in Kodankipatti may have provided a space for the exchange of ideas, but they could not compel either side to act in good faith. "Tight and reasonable boundaries have to be drawn around public space" as Mitchell notes, "to retain it as a place open for public political activity" (1996b: 153). The inability of the Government to provide a framework within which a solution could be agreed upon and enforced in Kodankipatti and elsewhere is placing these spaces for negotiation under threat. The basic issues involved are questions of control over space, and the power to determine access and usage of that space. "The exercise and maintenance of these sets of power relations", as Cope observes, "occur across space, through space, and require the use of space as an element of control, opportunity and regulation" (1996: 187). Such concerns are not unique to caste based villages, but are central to the very fabric of society.

CITIES, SLUMS AND CITIZENSHIP

The same issues of social exclusion and access, that rural Dalits face, are being perpetuated today in the residential patterns of urban India. Dalit '*bastis*', or slums, are often sited on land that has been 'encroached'; that is, public land that has been illegally occupied by the inhabitants. The rows of make-shift cardboard, corrugated iron, and plastic sheeting huts are precarious abodes, subject to the multiple pressures of state clean up drives, police corruption, and the forces of nature. Squatter settlements occasionally have the protection or sanction of local political parties, but their location is often susceptible to flooding, sited near rubbish tips, or under high voltage electricity pylons (Shiri 1998, Radhakrishnan 2000). The impermanent nature of the materials used in the construction process render such slums at great risk of fire, flood or high winds and rainstorms (Shiri 1998, Kannan 2000). The recurrent complaint of the Dalits in such areas is poverty.⁹ While the issues of dependency and access to resources are not as much of an issue in cities, due to the availability of caste-neutral jobs, urban areas tend to be segregated on the basis of caste. Bensman and Vidich (1995: 197) suggest that urban communities are voluntary in nature and based on choice of dwelling, but there are powerful incentives and sanctions that

⁹ In 1987-88, 33.4% of the total population were below the poverty line whereas the percentage of SCs under the poverty line was 44.7%. Source: 8th Five Year Plan 1992-7 cited in: Thamukku Nov-Dec 1999: p4).

determine such segregation and only by shrouding their origins are Dalits able to subsist in other areas. In the vicinity of one of the main cinemas in the heart of Madurai, for instance, Vincent and Rosy live with their three children. Vincent is an artist who works in a nearby workshop and the children go to school locally. There is nothing to suggest that they are any different from their neighbours. Whilst this family are Dalit Christians, however, the posters of the Thevar *Peravai* in the surrounding streets identify the predominant caste constituency of the locality. "We cannot say who we are", the family insists, "or we would not be able to live here" (20/08/99). Dalits coming to the city for the first time naturally gravitate towards those areas where their relatives live, and are put off by the display of casteist political posters in other areas. They may also experience difficulty in renting rooms from non-Dalit landlords who are wary of the reaction of others in the neighbourhood. Such enclaves or communities, therefore, create areas of intimate interaction whilst limiting contact with the outside world.¹⁰

The ties internal to such communities are evinced not only by the sense of community within the area, but in different codes of dress and other conventions of self-presentation. Dalit movement activists, thus, would wear *lungis* (informal waist-cloths) and T-shirts within the 'home', but would insist upon smarter attire before they entered public space. The notion of a 'home space' between the private and the public realms is emphasised by the ordered disorder of Melavassel, the State Housing Board Colony for SC Municipal workers in the centre of Madurai. The area is poorly maintained, squalid and unhygienic, and at first sight confirms the accusations of reproving reformers that the 'Dalits do not help themselves'. Livestock foul the streets and can be found in some of the blocks of flats, and anyone with anything to sell sets up a stall to hawk home-made *dosai* (rice pancakes), rice and lentils, or cheap sweets, trinkets and fruit. The open spaces planned by the architects for the heart of the building complex have become the site of rubbish heaps, flea markets, public toilets and livestock. The area is, in every sense a contradiction of the "bourgeois sense of what it meant for a space to be a modern city", and the governing conventions, and paternalistic state regulations have been inverted to create the "loose disorder" of a

¹⁰ Despite the increasingly global nature of contemporary life and the gradual erosion of 'markers of certainty', "people continue to *construct* some sort of boundaries around their places, however permeable" (Escobar 2001:147).

village (Kaviraj 1997a: 84). This inversion is functional, however, in the sense that it provides a sense of community, cheap food, affordable commodities, and, in the case of livestock, added income for the inhabitants.¹¹

V: REPRESENTATIONS OF SPACE: DALITS AND THE STATE DEMOCRATISED SPACE?

Questions of spatiality, therefore, are of crucial importance in shaping Dalit identity.¹² The democratic state, with its processes of participation, freedom of expression and association, and the provision of human rights, does provide possibilities for meaningful social change. It is now possible for a Dalit to be highly educated, employed in any form of occupation and freely mobile. The continuing salience of caste in social and political life, however, should caution us against too facile an association of the alterations that are evident in the public sphere, with the more complex and contracted processes of change in the negotiation of public space on a local level.¹³ Rather than deducing the existence of a liberal sphere of social relations from the fact of legislative change, that is, we must attempt an “*ascending* analysis of power, starting ... from its infinitesimal mechanisms (Foucault 1983: 308). One of the primary criticisms of Habermas is that he neglects the significance of marginal forms of public discourse and activity, which are often in conflict with the bourgeois public sphere (Thompson 1994: 91). The constitutional safeguards against discrimination on the basis of caste have afforded the Dalits a weapon with which to combat their exclusion, but taking a case to court is rarely easy.¹⁴ Most Dalits lack the resources of time, money and knowledge with which to prosecute a legal case. Furthermore they must surmount the hindrances placed in their way by an antipathetic police force and judiciary, overcome the monetary and social clout of their opponents and fight against the divisions in their own community. Given this it is little wonder that so few

¹¹ Such spaces constitute what Foucault refers to as a *heterotopia*: an “actually lived and socially created spatiality, concrete and abstract at the same time, the habitus of social practices” (Soja 1993 (1989): 143).

¹² Identity here is concerned with the self-image and self-esteem of a community – real or imaginary – in dealing with the questions of their role and existence: “Who are we?” “What position in society do we have vis-à-vis other communities?”, and “How are we related to others?”

¹³ I follow Mitchell here in declaring that the public sphere “in Habermas’ sense is a universal, abstract realm in which democracy occurs. The materiality of this sphere is, so to speak, immaterial to its functioning” (1995: 117).

¹⁴ Writing in 1972, Gallanter concluded that the difficulties associated with taking a case to court were so great that the question became, how and “why any case were brought” at all (cited in Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 128). Subadra (1999: WS-31) provides similar evidence from Tamilnadu.

prosecutions have been successful under the Prevention of Atrocities (SC/ST) Act (Human Rights Watch: 1999: Chapter X).

Local movements often coalesce around immediate issues to do with living conditions: the demand for more land or permanent housing, demands for the provision of certain amenities, and demands for legal recognition (cf. Escobar 2001: 147).¹⁵ Such protest is, perforce, directed at the state and highlights the role of the government in the construction and mediation of public space. At a minimal level, such slums often declare allegiance to one particular party or candidate who they look to for protection, and assistance. At election time, as de Wit (1996: 93) notes, the candidates travel round the more established settlements making promises and canvassing for votes. The demands for urban services, the regularisation of land and the provision of jobs are some of the main ways that politicians are able to establish patron-client networks to further their careers. Such attention is sporadic, and is concentrated around the moment of an election, but the semi-official recognition accorded to a settlement by the visit of a candidate may sanction the continued occupation of public space and also serves to assimilate Dalit slums into the public sphere. Not everyone is so lucky; an annual cycle of destruction and regeneration is played out along the riverbanks of the Vaigai in Madurai. Squatters encroach the dried up river beds, and establish homes on the verges of the river, but their tenancy is a precarious one, and the onset of the monsoon is often the prelude to a deluge that sweeps their meagre possessions away. The attempts at city 'regeneration' – a euphemism for the bulldozing of slums – often appear to be as inexorable and relentless as the floods of the Vaigai. These efforts, however, are accompanied by official promises of resettlement and re-housing. Such promises symbolise the squatters' recognition as citizens who are entitled to residential space in the city, even if they are subsequently forgotten.

More permanently, the state is involved in the construction of housing for the Scheduled Castes. Such constructions are seen as a resource – especially by the homeless street-dwellers who aspire towards more permanent dwellings – but also as

¹⁵ According to MIDS Working Paper 134: 30.9% of SC households have electricity, as opposed to 61.3% of non-SC households. 26.8 % of non-SC households have Sanitation, whereas only 9.8% of SC houses do. Source: Thamukku Nov.-Dec. 1999: p2).

a means of regulation and control. The sites selected for such houses are frequently undesirable, or outside the city and the main areas of employment. The housing boards in the heart of the city tend to be reserved for those engaged in 'municipal work' (cleaning, sweeping and scavenging) and occupancy is predicated on at least one member of the family remaining in council employment. As such the housing blocks constitute both an opportunity and a limitation, and serve to re-forge a link between employment and caste. Dalit movement orators frequently turn their critical gaze on the houses provided for them by the government. They see them as reproducing the very inequalities that they are trying to eradicate, and they question the motives of the state. If such developments are really intended to advance the uplift of the Dalits they argue, they would not be built with sloped roofs that prevent the addition of another storey. The typical 'Dalit house' has one room constructed from concrete with a little toilet at the back. The door is usually a sheet of cast iron that makes the houses unbearably hot in the daytime, but relatively cool at night. There are no open windows, only patterned grids that look out onto other similar constructions. In other words, the government is merely persisting in the construction of colonies, rather than creating spaces for the free interaction of all castes and communities.

THE STATE VERSIONS OF SOCIETY

Neighbourhoods, according to Appadurai (1995: 215), are ideally the "stages for their own self-production", and yet the ideological commitments of a ruling party frequently induce them to engage in the construction of localities. The *Samathuvarpuram* (equality village) project is just such an enterprise. Hailing the scheme as a giant leap forward in the fight against caste, the Government of Tamil Nadu accelerated the construction of *Samathuvarpurams* across the state (although reports in early 2001 suggested that the DMK had abandoned the scheme). Built along similar lines to the Dalit colonies these villages are peopled by members of different castes, with the intention of producing a truly casteless society. The imposition of these mixed-caste villages from above attempts to by-pass the gradual processes required to breakdown caste prejudice. Without spaces and incentives for interaction that enable different caste members to question their feelings of distrust and hostility, however, the villages can only provide houses for individuals, they can not foster a sense of community. As it is the scheme has been criticised for being little more than window-dressing. Periodically there are stories citing the poor quality of the housing,

the declining percentage of high castes in the villages, and condemning the politics associated with the project – which make *Samathuvarpurams* an election issue rather than a constant concern. The projects *do* constitute an attempt to break the caste-based segregation of society, but they highlight the difficulties involved in any attempt to impose a sense of equality and unity. “Liberty is a practice”, as Foucault insists (1993: 162). Material and legal changes, in other words, can never guarantee liberty or equality.

TRANSFORMING SPACES

The problem inherent in the state’s attempt to create the space for a casteless society is that it ignores the multiple processes of negotiation and discussion that go into the production of a locality. “The work of producing neighbourhoods – life-worlds constituted by relatively stable associations, by relatively known and shared histories, and by collectively traversed and legible spaces and places – is often at odds with the projects of the nation-state” (Appadurai 1995: 215). To expect community feeling to emerge from mere proximity is misguided. The people who enter a *Samathuvarpuram* are not isolated individuals. Each has been shaped by their relatives and social upbringing, which they do not leave behind at the gates of the settlement. The transformation of this mixed residential space into a meaningful *place*, would require a ‘conscious moment’ to bring people together as a community. Architecture can only produce positive effects, as Foucault argues, “when the liberating intentions of the architect coincide with the real practice of the people” (1993: 163). The fissures and cracks that have appeared in the walls of the *Samathuvarpuram* houses are symbolic of the fragility of the scheme and its inability to create social harmony by placing people together, rather than addressing the root causes of caste conflict (Illangovan 2000). Similarly, the flags, painted boards and posters that adorn the walls of Dalit residential areas are symbolic of the fragility of the status quo. The assertive images of tigers, panthers, and weaponry testify to Dalit rejections of established society, and threaten imminent disorder unless there is social change.

VI: THE PRODUCTION OF LOCALITY: IDENTITY, PROTEST & SPACE MOVEMENTS IN SPACE

“Spatiality”, according to Soja, situates life in an active arena. “To be alive is to participate in the social production of space, to shape and be shaped by a constantly

evolving spatiality which constitutes and concretizes social action and relationships” (1985: 90). Spaces and places are not fixed or immutable in any sense. Everyday social relations create space as well as being structured by it. When members of the Ambedkar People’s Movement walked down high caste streets with their shoes on in the 1970s, they were not only challenging the dominance of the local caste landlords, they were establishing a claim to physical space and their rights as members of a democratic polity. The importance of spatial location is reflected in the emphasis that movements give to the term ‘*cheri*’ as they attempt to forge an ‘imagined community’ of ‘*cheri* people’ to fight against caste. Lefebvre distinguished between *representational* spaces (social, lived space, space in use) and *representations* of space (planned, imposed, controlled space) (1991: 45). Spaces usually start as the latter, such as the innumerable housing blocks and colonies constructed for the Dalits by the local and state governments, and become the first as people move in, add makeshift extensions and inhabit the place. This transition of spaces into places, as Appadurai notes, usually “requires a conscious moment” - such as the house warming ceremony - “which may subsequently be remembered as relatively routine” (1995: 209). The production of locality, however, is not a ‘once-and-for-all’ process, but must be constantly renewed and revised to match the changing nature of its constituency. Rituals that contribute to a sense of community are especially salient in this process. “Insofar as neighbourhoods are imagined, produced and maintained against some sort of ground (social, material, environmental) they also require and produce contexts, against which their own intelligibility takes shape” (Appadurai 1995: 209).

This process is most obviously apparent in times of change or challenge to the established order, when it is especially important to restore some predictability to one’s environment by marking the boundaries of one’s territory. “Establishing the territory” – through wall posters, graffiti, and sporadic harassment of outsiders – “generates security” (Ley and Cybriwsky 1974: 505). In Ley and Cybriwsky’s (1974) study of urban gangs in Philadelphia, predominantly white suburbs were trying to maintain their ‘integrity’ in the face of an increasing black presence. In this sort of situation “graffiti are commonly boundary markers; they delineate an interface, the edge of socially claimed space” (ibid. 501). Such boundaries and markers have historically been redundant in village India, where the limits of each territory have

been fairly distinct. In urban and semi-urban India, however, such inscriptions and emblems of “defended neighbourhoods” are common, and city walls become the barometers of local political affiliation and opinion. These urban communities are said to desire to reproduce the strong sense of identity that persists in rural communities. The difference, as Bensman and Vidich (1995: 197) suggest, is that urban associations, at least initially, are voluntary rather than given at birth. Social movements and political parties are critically involved in the construction of such bounded communities. Flagpoles, colours, posters and paintings constitute “part of a ‘twilight zone of communication’, an outlet for often deeply felt but rarely articulated sentiments and attitudes” (Ley and Cybriwsky 1974: 492).

MOVEMENT MARKERS & DEFENDED NEIGHBOURHOODS

In the functioning of a movement or a party, such symbols play an important role in marking off a defended neighbourhood. The Dalits in villages around Madurai cited deterrence as one of the primary reasons for joining an aggressive movement such as the DPI. Time and again villagers would point to the flag of their movement as the object that stood between them and violent retaliation on the part of aggressors. This function is only possible because the emblems of the movements are widely recognised. They serve to identify an outpost of a much larger, socially imagined, community that will intervene on behalf of its members. Sometimes these communities are literally *imagined*, as when the movement is little more than a banner, and yet the movement insignia suggest a wider membership. This outward orientation militates against the division of society into independent enclaves from which they emerge only at great risk. “Public social movements”, as Mitchell puts it, “understand that they must create spaces for representation” (1995: 124, Escobar 2001: 156). This understanding emphasises the importance of material public space as an arena in which different people can communicate with each other. The difference in emphasis between the resistant peasants of Scott’s (1985, 1990) work, and the activities of social movements, is that the latter are not content to carve out a small breathing space for themselves within the established social structure. Rather, they demand access to the genuine political spaces of any given society.

Dalit movements are not content with defending *cheris* against attacks, they are actively seeking to alter the social conditions that give rise to such oppression. The

logic of this enterprise dictates an approach that is geared towards the public at large rather than just their own community. This logic is encapsulated in the pasting of posters to town buses. Ley and Cybriwsky note the examples of graffiti artists who spray paint their images in the heart of opposition territory. They refer to this as a “conquest of territory”, and insist that “to claim access to an inaccessible location is to make a claim of primacy for oneself” (1974: 494). Such acts are always performed ‘for an audience’, however, and it is this aspect that strikes me as being most significant for social movements. The presence of a Dalit poster in the heart of the city, in an upper caste location, or on the sides of buses travelling around the area, is not so much an expression of the power to claim territory as an assertion of the ability to communicate.¹⁶ Such advertisements not only attract more supporters to an event, but also inform countless onlookers about the event and the issues in question. Public space, as Ruddick insists, is “the active medium for the construction of new class cultures ... or the place where marginalised identities can be challenged” (1996: 135). These incursions into public space ensure that Dalit resistance is neither muted nor contained. Occupation of public space, as Berman puts it, “can both compel and empower all these people to see each other, not through a glass darkly, but face to face” (in Ruddick 1996: 134).

IDENTITY IN ISOLATION

“If we are to understand space”, as Harvey observes, “we must consider its symbolic meaning and its complex impact on behaviour” (Harvey 1988: 36). Dalit children grow up in a social environment that is situated beyond the boundaries of the main village. The people who they come into contact with, play with and get to know come from the same background, do the same sort of jobs and have a similar outlook on life. In rural areas, Dalit children are brought up to respect and fear the landlords and patrons upon whom their livelihood depends.¹ In urban settings there is less sense of being in thrall to the higher-castes, and yet they suffer from the common problems of poverty, lack of resources and lack of education. “The ability to acquire and sustain alternative identities, or to redefine the meaning of symbols of inferiority”, as Mosse asserts, “depends crucially on having the power and resources to change existing relations of dependence” (Mosse 1996: 1). Affirmative action programmes and legal

¹⁶ I, at least, got to know about meetings and demonstrations by reading posters pasted to the sides of buses, and others also looked out for these messages.

guarantees, in conjunction with the work of Dalit movements, have created new and ever more assertive forms of consciousness amongst the Dalits. In most places they no longer accept the subordination implied in the continuing performance of caste specific tasks such as carrying death news, beating drums at life-cycle rituals, or scavenging work. Where they remain dependent upon higher caste landowners for their subsistence, however, such assertion would be suicidal. Dalits were prepared to accept the open practice of the two-glass system in Somankottai, and to have water poured into their cupped hands in Naranavalasu, because these acts of resignation brought tangible advantages with them. The Dalits in these areas, however, still maintained their dignity by asserting their common humanity and by avoiding petty indignities where possible.

Dalit experience varies from place to place. In the city of Madurai, for example, certain slums are better known for their activism than others are and this confidence is mirrored in the proud display of movement insignia. Even amongst the Dalits experience and identity are also mediated by caste. It was commonly stated that Pallars were the most organised and militant of the Dalits, followed by Paraiyars. Chakkiliyars, by contrast were said to be internally divided and lacked any coherent leadership or major movement. Various smaller movements were vying to be the Chakkiliyar equivalent of the Puthiya Tamilagam (mainly Pallar) or the Liberation Panthers (mainly Paraiyar). These differences were as much a product of spatial differences as of cultural variations. The Pallars traditionally lived together in greater numbers, and often owned land. This made it easier to organise the community as a group. The Paraiyars were more scattered and more divided amongst themselves, but the Chakkiliyars tended to live in areas where they constituted the minority. They were seen to be of low social status and riven by disputes even by Dalit standards. The Dalit community is divided by caste, but also along gender, class and age lines as well. An emerging Dalit elite has prospered, but it is commonly stated that they are not concerned with improving the community as whole and that they are content with carving out a niche for themselves and their families, often retiring to plush housing and safer neighbourhoods.

LAYING CLAIM TO SPACE: MOVEMENT AIMS AND METHODS

By contrast to the mobility strategies of the elite, Dalit movements are fundamentally concerned with gaining *equal* access to public space for all. This struggle is carried forward on a number of different levels. On the one hand there is the physical occupation of material space by protestors engaged in meetings, hunger-fasts, rallies and road-blockades.¹⁷ This is a political assertion of the right to protest, and the right of citizenship. On the other there is the symbolic or cultural approach involving the construction of Ambedkar statues, the naming of residential areas as 'Ambedkar Nagar', the raising of movement flags, the celebration of Ambedkar's birthday, or the publication of Dalit magazines and the production of Dalit art festivals. More subtle expressions of this determination for public recognition may be witnessed in the choice of names such as Ambedkar for Dalit children, a determination to do well in school, and the use of western clothes that have no caste connotations. Each of these ventures is an attempt to realise the metaphorical spaces provided in the public sphere, and an attempt to register their existence and their protest in everyday public consciousness. The Tamilnadu Theological Seminary for example, has always had a bookshop that sells books on and by Dalits, but it is located within a private institution. It was with a great sense of achievement, therefore, that the convenor of the Dalit Resource Centre, Alex, opened *Ezhuthu* (Letters) in a complex in the city centre. The bookshop is devoted to the sale of Dalit books and novels, and establishes Dalit literature on the map of the city. Such incursions into public space are significant in the struggle for social inclusion.

MOVEMENT MESSAGES

The flag-raising ceremony of a Dalit movement lays claim to an area, but it is also a performance. The party lights, loudspeakers, and convoys of followers are designed not only to cement the adherence of an area to the movement, but also to advertise this fact to others. It serves both as a warning and as an invitation. A warning in the sense that potential aggressors are informed that this area is affiliated to a particular movement which will not stand idly by if they are attacked. The presence of a movement implies the existence of informed cadres who know the legal ropes and

¹⁷ As far as I am aware, the route-ing of Dalit rallies does not pose the difficulties associated with Hindu/Muslim demonstrations. The Dalit movements are seen as politically sensitive, rather than

have the resources to bring cases before a court or to raise the public profile of an incident. At the same time, however, it is also an invitation in the sense that the material is all directed outwards; other Dalits or other oppressed groups can come to such an area for aid. Muslims addressed many of the Dalit meetings that I attended, and there was a conscious attempt to bring the two communities together. Likewise the speeches of the Dalit leaders are careful not to adopt too casteist a line. When canvassing for the seat in Chidambaram, Thirumavalavan took pains to assure the other communities that he was campaigning against discriminatory practices, rather than for or against any particular caste. With such a message he was able to gain support from the minority caste Hindus in the area. The boards and flags also serve to assert the existence of an alternative. In villages and towns across the country the emblems of political parties pronounce the presence of these organisations in an area. Mimicking the standards of established institutions, or following an established repertoire of action, enables easy recognition but it also highlights the fact that Dalits now have their own autonomous organisations.

FLYING THE FLAG: THE ASSERTION OF POLITICAL SPACE

The flag-raising ceremony of a Dalit movement, in this perspective, becomes the conscious moment in which a living space is transformed into a political place. "As a symbolic violation of the social order, such a movement attracts and will continue to attract attention, to provoke censure and to act ... as the fundamental bearer of significance" (Hebdige 1979: 19). The identity of a *cheri* that has affiliated itself to a Dalit movement is qualitatively different from one that remains unmoved by the struggle. Erecting the emblem of a movement in a place marks the end of obedience (though not necessarily the end of fear) and the beginning of an organised struggle against inequality. The inhabitants of Jansi Rani Complex in the heart of Madurai do not have proper homes to live in. Makeshift tents on the pavement provide shelter, the river is their bathroom, and the concourse of a Hindu shrine provides their meeting space. Working as rag and bone merchants, or as self employed cleaners of drains and sewers they eke out a living on the road. The walls of the shrine where they gather, however, has been painted with the images of the DPI: Ambedkar stares out at the dismal scene and ranged alongside him are likenesses of Thirumavalavan and a

communally problematic. Huge numbers of police are present, therefore, and permission for rallies is often denied but that is to do with more vaguely defined 'law and order' problems.

panther. "They are there as a security measure", Alagar, a middle aged man slightly the worse for drink, insists. "To guard against people or against police raids who come at night to drag us away" (Interviewed 22/03/99). The residents here do not refer to the mural as a protective charm, but they emphasise the power behind the painting. As Sekhar, a good-looking lad in his early twenties who has lived in Jansi Rani Complex all his life, says, "it is only after joining this movement that we can be here undisturbed. Before, there were countless caste clashes and continuous police harassment, but now if he (Thirumavalavan) raises his hand Madurai District will be destroyed" (ibid.).

VII: CONTESTED SPACE: EXCLUSION, ENVY AND VIOLENCE

BRAVE WORDS AND HOLLOW EMBLEMS

Time and again the flags, statues and posters of a movement were referred to as a deterrent, as an indication that a community does not stand alone. "There are forty *cheris* in Madurai depending on SMP colony", as one DPI activist put it, "and SMP colony is dependent on forty *cheris*" (Interview 23/3/99). The assertion is that the movement provides each branch with a resource and a network of people who will stand by them. These branches constitute 'pockets of solidarity', but "assertive or aggressive graffiti", as Ley and Cybriwsky observe, "represent more than attitudes. They are dispositions to behaviour, and as such impress a bolder outline on the fuzzy transition between perception and action" (1974: 505). Assertive slogans resound through the speeches, and literature of many Dalit movements exhorting their followers to "return a blow for a blow". "Spring into action, make your enemies tremble", declaims one Liberation Panther slogan, "plan for the morrow and arise with courage. Escape your fears and set out with resolve (repeated), fall upon your foes like a bolt of thunder (repeated)". "If you kill one of us", Sathai 'Bomb' Baikiaraj exclaims, "we will kill four of you!" Such slogans reflect both the attitudes of a younger more radical generation as well as constituting an inducement to action. The riots in Bodi in 1993 (cf. Alm 1996: 116) were partly set off because the upper castes felt threatened by the violence of the Dalit slogans. At some DPI meetings it was apparent that several of those in attendance were bored by the speeches and wanted to resort to direct action. The assertion/action ratio, however, was blurred by the reaction of the other castes to the symbols of Dalit consciousness.

The domination of a neighbourhood by one organisation can lead to the creation of a counter-community (Bensman and Vidich 1995: 198). It was often hard to tell whether movement membership predisposed Dalits to assertive action, or whether the mere presence of the banners incited the wrath of the dominant castes and led them to initiate confrontation. Declaring allegiance to a movement does not necessarily generate security. It is plain that many movements have not sunk deep roots into the communities where they have raised flagpoles. These emblems exist as little more than hollow banners that are meaningless until they are acted upon. The marking of public or private space, is a poor substitute for its occupation and maintenance, and events are a poor substitute for the process of building a movement. "The DPI is only here in name", the villagers of Vadianpatti complained, and the inhabitants of Allalaberi said that their needs were being ignored in the absence of the Dalit Liberation Movement. In the face of upper caste aggression the Dalits of Kodankipatti were unable to defend their claims to autonomy and they fled their village when attacked, leaving the flagpole of the DPI to be uprooted and cast into the village well. Six miles down the road however, their brethren in Muduvarpatti gave them asylum and afforded them protection from further violence. When the Kounders in Muduvarpatti tried to attack, and when the aggressors from Kodankipatti ventured into the latter village, they met with fierce and violent resistance. "Establishing the territory generates security", as Ley and Cybriwsky note, "maintaining or embellishing it guarantees status" (1974: 505).¹⁸

BOUNDARIES, BORDERS AND BLOODSHED

Movement symbols and emblems lay claim to space. When the members of a Backward Caste organisation attempted to paste posters in SMP Colony, therefore, the DPI youth of the area challenged them and a clash ensued. The colours of a given movement, thus, are often directed against oppressors, but they also warn other organisations to stay clear.¹⁹ When I visited the village of Melavalavu in April 1999,

¹⁸ When asked how the movement could protect areas in which the Dalits formed a minority, Thirumavalavan pointed to Muduvarpatti as an example. "If you ask how the minority areas will receive protection", he said, "it is when the surrounding and adjacent areas organise. When those people form organisations then the minorities will be protected" (Interview 3/11/99).

¹⁹ Given the problems associated with movements based upon exclusive identities I would follow Chandhoke in criticising some of the more utopian advocates of 'civil society'. "Far from being a realm of solidarity and warm personalised interaction, [civil society] is itself a fragmented, divided and a hierarchically structured realm" (2001: 19). In the aftermath of Hindutva, Mandal and the massacre in Melavalavu, "we can hardly accept Putnam's assumption that social associations function to further

there was little to mark the spot as an important site in the Dalit struggle. A few tattered posters advertising past protests clung to the walls, but there were none of the usual indicators of conscious assertion. Speaking to the youth of the village it was apparent that the barren nature of the space reflected the reality. None of them was involved in movement activity, and the fear of the events of 1997 was still patent. At the time, news of the massacre had galvanised Dalit movements across India.²⁰ On the first anniversary of the killings a public meeting had been held in the village, but no sign of this activism was evident in Melavalavu itself.

I returned to the village on the occasion of the 2nd anniversary of the massacre. In the interim the DPI had erected a flagpole on a plinth of seven steps, a headstone had been constructed by the graves of the fallen, and colourful murals depicting Murugesan, Ambedkar and a Panther adorned the walls. Melavalavu, like other sites of social centrality has become a site of resistance. Spaces that have such social centrality, as Hetherington observes, “are likely also to be what we may call spaces of occasion, in which the values and political views of a group might be expressed and around which identities are ... performed” (1998: 108). Over the course of the day those assembled were addressed by many of the major Dalit leaders in the state, but the emphasis was on the Liberation Panthers. By occupying the symbolic space of the village the DPI had appropriated the territory for itself and asserted itself as the legitimate guardian of Murugesan’s memory. “The creation of symbolic places is not given in the stars but painstakingly nurtured and fought over precisely because of the hold that place can have over the imaginary ... Materiality, representation and imagination are not separate worlds (Harvey 1996: 322). By identifying the space with the movement, the DPI was attempting to annex the space to the exclusion of others. Such exclusivity may help in the process of identity construction, and in

civic engagement” (2001: 17). Although Putnam (1993) qualifies many of his assertions he pays insufficient attention to the fissures inherent within civil society itself. Social Capital, as Chandhoke notes, is not a panacea. Rather it is highly context dependent and does not benefit all in equal measure. The examples of Farmer’s movements (well summarised in Corbridge & Harriss 2000) and Upper Caste networks (as detailed in Jeffrey 2000) indicate that certain associations are exclusive and particular in their scope.

²⁰ The massacre is dealt with in other chapters. The panchayat president of Melavalavu, Murugesan, and five others (one follower was killed later) were pulled from a bus in broad daylight and executed by a Thevar mob.

maintaining a strong commitment to the Liberation Panthers, but it may be counter-productive to the aims of the movement.

CASTE SPACES, CONTESTED PLACES

Disputes over space and the right to represent a community are common, and are one of the reasons for the continuing disunity of the Dalit community. Issues of this nature are usually confined to criticism of other movements and the approach that they adopt. Although few movements have the time or resources to campaign actively for new recruits and areas, the defection of a community from one organisation to another is trumpeted as a success. At this level conflict is latent and usually avoided, and the members of all movements pull together in times of crisis. There is a tendency, however, to associate Dalit movements with caste constituencies. Boundaries of this nature are deep-rooted and more emotive than those drawn along the lines of strategy or ideology. In March 1999 the emphasis accorded to such differences led to bloodshed between Pallars and Paraiyars in the village of Pudhupatti in the south-central District of Virudhunagar. The emotive importance of symbolic space is highlighted in this case, where a seemingly insignificant quarrel over the siting and size of a flagpole led to the deaths of 5 people. Petty squabbles and arguments between the two communities are endemic, especially in liquor shops, but the identification of the two castes with separate organisations heightened the sense of antagonism. The Pallars identified themselves with the Puthiya Tamilagam, whereas the Paraiyars had recently switched allegiance from the caste based Paraiyar Peravai (Front) to the Liberation Panthers. The caste connotations of the riots may be less significant than the fact of inter-movement competition, but the rhetoric of caste is more likely to inflame passions than that of movement competition. It was in caste terms that the incident was described to me (Arseervardam 28/03/99).

The immediate trigger of the violence was a dispute over the erection of a large flagpole by the PT, one of the supports of which rested up against the DPI statue of Ambedkar. The DPI resented this, claiming that they had wanted to embellish the statue by constructing a dome above it, they therefore asked for the support to be removed. When this request was ignored, DPI activists tore the supporting bar down themselves. Heated words were exchanged but the problem seemed to be negotiable. On the next day, however, a DPI activist was confronted, beaten, and then burnt alive.

Reprisals followed and a riot ensued that has soured the relations between the two communities. DPI activists in Madurai portrayed the event as a dispute between an established Dalit party and themselves. They claimed that the violence would show that the DPI was strong and there to stay and would thus enable the two groups to work together (Interview in Melavassel 28/3/99). Such analysis is seductive, and yet its attraction should not blind people to the danger of organising along caste lines or to the fact that five people died in this incident. Inter-movement competition is almost inevitable, but it is exacerbated by the appeal to caste. Such appeals re-emphasise the divisions that the term 'Dalit' attempts to overcome, and they preclude the possibility of a Dalit coalition. Having said that, the differences that surfaced between the two movements as a result of this local conflict were put into perspective by the massacre in Tirunelveli. The establishment of two movements in one area may give rise to conflicts between Dalit communities, but the reason for their establishment cannot be forgotten for long. Many Dalit activists subscribed to the view that 'unity is forged in crisis', and the antipathy of the establishment to the rise of independent Dalit movements is such that crises are endemic.

VIII. *THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC SPACE* DISSENT, DISORDER & DEMOCRACY

The internecine feuding between Dalit castes and movements has precluded the emergence of a united Dalit Movement, but this has not meant that individual movements have been unable to co-operate or act in unison. Some incidents are so momentous as to erase past differences and points of contention to change the parameters of the struggle. The massacres in Melavalavu and Tirunelveli were events, which captured the fears and demands of the Dalit community, and re-asserted the importance of unity in adversity. The murders in Melavalavu confirmed Dalit fears about the violence of the upper castes and the precarious nature of their right to public space. If a panchayat president from the ruling party of the state could be murdered with impunity, then who was safe from the retaliation of the dominant caste? In this context it is obvious that the movements cannot be compared to the urban gangs of 'street corner society'. Gangs engage in similar processes of marking territory, but the *defence* of space is merely one concern of the Dalit movements. More importantly they are an attempt to realise and protect the right of Dalits to *enter* public space. It is in the absence of such movements and attempts to negotiate access to and recognition

in public space that Bihar has gone to extremes. Civil Society, the Hindu editorial asserted in the aftermath of yet another massacre of Dalits by the Ranvir Sena, “does not exist in parts of Bihar” (20/06/00).

Movements and NGOs are vital to the assertion and protection of a sphere of public interaction and politics. They cannot, however, function independently or wholly in opposition to the state (Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 208, Chandhoke 2001: 10). Both these assertions about movement operation are highlighted by what happened in Tirunelveli. On the 23rd of July 1999, the PT led a march of plantation workers through the streets of the city to the Collector’s office. On arrival at this venue it is customary for the procession leaders to be allowed to advance and present their demands to the Collector. On this occasion, however, the rally was prevented from advancing by police. An exchange of words and insults ensued before the police charged at the procession and drove the crowd in panic towards and into the river. 17 people died in the waters of the Tamiraparani river, desperately trying to swim to the safety of the other bank, or subjected to the blows of police officials as they tried to head back to the shore. “Despite the constitutional guarantees of the right to association and freedom of expression”, as Karat insists, “in practice the fundamental rights of ordinary citizens are severely circumscribed. It is only the continuous democratic activity relying on mass mobilisation that has to some extent succeeded in expanding the rights of citizens and breaching the monopoly of privileges vested in those who control wealth and power in society” (Aug 4, 2000: 113-4). Without recurrent sorties into public space to voice grievances and demand justice, the rights to association and expression are rendered meaningless, yet it is the state that can facilitate the effective functioning of these rights.

It is only through the continuous and conscious exercise of the rights to protest, to vote or to use the common resources of a village that Dalit movements are able to assert their citizenship. During the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, the Dalits of Chidambaram were denied access to the polling booths by caste Hindus who resented their support for an independent candidate (Independent Initiative Report). In the face of such opposition, protest, and perhaps violent protest, is vital to the creation and maintenance of a political public space. Without such acts of resistance the public sphere remains a hollow shell. It is often “only by being ‘violent’ that excluded

groups have gained access to the public spaces of democracy”, as Mitchell notes, and it is precisely this ‘violence’ that has forced the liberalisation of public space laws” (1996b: 156). Civil society in such instances becomes, as Chandhoke points out, “a *site for struggle* between the forces that uphold power equations and those that battle these equations in an attempt to further the democratic project” (2001: 19). When the Liberation Panthers courted arrest in Perambalur (see Chapter 8), they consciously echoed the civil disobedience campaigns of the Indian nationalist movement. Dalit movements frequently point out that the non-violence of the nationalist struggle has been mythologised. Without protest, they argue, independence and citizenship would have remained mere chimeras. “For women, African Americans, all manner of ethnic groups, workers and progressive activists, the fight to claim the streets, parks, court houses, and other public spaces of the city is precisely the fight to claim their rights as members of the polity, as citizens who have both the duty and the right to reshape social, economic, and political life” (Mitchell 1996b: 172). The earlier example of recidivist, caste based movements should serve to remind us that not all Social Movements are necessarily progressive, but the thrust of the argument remains the same. Public space constitutes a material place or site within and from which political activity flows, it is only through an occupation of such spaces that the aims of protest can be made visible and, thus, negotiable.

IX. CONCLUSION: POWER, PLACE & PROTEST

‘Public Space’ denotes those areas that are held in common and have habitually been used as places for gathering and the communication of political ideas and social exchange. Public spaces are sites for the creation and negotiation of identities and ideologies (Mitchell 1996a, Ruddick 1996). Exclusions in and from public space have frequently been used to foreclose possibilities for certain groups, and enhance those of others. In this chapter I have tried to chart the spatiality of political protest. Without access to public space, it is clear, protest remains a privatised issue of conscience, and it can be ignored. Individual Dalit villagers who refuse to perform the demeaning tasks that are habitually demanded of them can be socially boycotted, ostracised and ignored. Only when the Dalits as a community unite in their refusal to undergo such humiliation is meaningful change a possibility. Without recourse to public space the public may become ‘balkanised’ into communities of mutual distrust. By contesting in and for public space Dalit movements assert their status as members of the ‘public’,

and demand recognition as citizens. The next chapter charts the struggles by Dalit women to extend the democratic import of Dalit protest and challenge the Dalit movements to match up to their rhetoric. The norms that confine women to a subordinate place within the home are being questioned as Dalit women unite and articulate their grievances in public space. Challenges to public space are mounted in different ways by higher caste movements that are reluctant to recognise the rights of Dalits, by patriarchal conventions that confine women to the kitchen, and by the state in its reluctance to grant permits for demonstrations and in its enactment of anti-terrorist laws. The use and availability of public space is also constrained by the encroachment of the homeless onto pavements and sidewalks, and by the commercialisation of real estate. In face of these multiple challenges, people's movements assert their right to protest and express themselves publicly, since it is only through such public articulation of alternatives that issues of citizenship and democracy can be negotiated and contested. Space, as Massey puts it, is socially constructed, but "the social is spatially constructed too" (1994: 254). The spatial organisation of a given society, in other words, influences the way it works. The caste-based segregation of Indian cities and villages has not disappeared, and it continues to inform political and social activity in the 'modern' world. Dalits often speak of being 'imprisoned within *cheris*', and of the immutability of *cheris*. '*Cheris* do not change' I was often told. "The ability of people to confound the established spatial orders, either through physical movement or through their own conceptual and political acts of re-imagination", however, "means that space and place can never be 'given', and that the process of their socio-political construction must always be considered" (Gupta and Ferguson 1999: 17).

SECTION THREE:
Movement Organisation and Movement Contradictions

I am a Dalit!
I have some false titles!
In Demographic calculation
I am an Indian.
On the basis of my dwelling
I am a Tamilian.
Because I can read and write
I am educated.
As far as political parties are concerned
I am a voter.
In places where I am unknown I am a nomad.
However, my comrades!
Born and bought up in the village
I am only old Karuppan
Paraiyar's son!
My status
Is that given to my Granddad
India's
village life
Gandhi's
Idealistic picture is true.
I, who want to dismantle
The rigidity of the caste system,
Say with courage
Yes!
I am a Dalit

(K. Subbaiah, Pondicheri. In *Dalit Mulukkam* Dec. 1998. Trans. Self)

CHAPTER SIX: DALIT WOMEN AND DALIT MOVEMENTS

Agency, Autonomy and Activism

“Singularly positioned at the bottom of India’s caste, class, and gender hierarchies, largely uneducated and consistently paid less than their male counterparts, Dalit women make up the majority of landless labourers and scavengers, as well as a significant percentage of the women forced into prostitution in rural areas or sold into urban brothels” (Human Rights Watch 2000: 166).

I: WOMEN IN INDIA: AUTONOMY AND THE NORTH/SOUTH DIVIDE

INTRODUCTION: DALITS AND/OR WOMEN

Dalit women are frequently referred to as the ‘oppressed of the oppressed’. A recurrent debate in any Dalit women’s forum is whether they are primarily exploited in terms of caste or gender. The answer to this question influences the mode of organisations. Those that emphasise caste domination tend to call for anti-caste movements, constituted of all members of the lower castes fighting for a more egalitarian society. Those that perceive their subordination in gender terms, however, are more likely to seek cross-class and -caste alliances of women in an attempt to resist the patriarchal structures of power. This chapter examines the position of Dalit women in society, and in the movements for change, and draws out the conflicting strands of women’s activism. Bela Malik (1999: 323) argues that whilst women in general suffer from oppression on the basis of gender, upper caste women discriminate against Dalits on the basis of caste. In this context a purely Dalit *women’s* platform seems natural. Though I partly agree with this sentiment, especially because theoretical feminism has rarely been adequately sensitive to the context of caste oppression, I would be wary of advocating the kind of exclusivity entailed here. Whilst the experience of casteism between women encourages the formation of Dalit-only movements, this should not be allowed to obscure the prevalence of sexual discrimination. Dalit movements undoubtedly draw strength from the participation and leadership of their women, and the adoption of ‘women’s rights issues’ will strengthen the ideological consistency of the struggle for a more equal society.

TAMIL WOMEN AND SELF-RESPECT

Tamil Nadu figures prominently as a ‘success story’ of fertility decline, partly due to the history of Periyar’s Self Respect Movement (SRM) which insisted upon the equality and autonomy of women. Whilst a prominent strand of Tamil culture portrays motherhood as next to Godliness, Periyar “disinvested the reproductive role

of women within the endogamous/monogamous family of its religious aura and linked it with this-worldly dynamics” (Anandhi 1998: 155). Marriage was thus cast as an extension of property relations and the means by which heirs are produced. Where brahminical patriarchy sought to control women’s sexuality, because the purity of caste was contingent upon it (Geetha 1998a:319, 329), the SRM viewed contraception as a means for women to exercise control over their bodies, and thus free themselves from male domination (Anandhi 1998: 153, Geetha 1998: WS9). The ability of Tamil women to make ‘reasoned decisions about fertility’, according to A. Sen, is an important factor in the state’s fertility decline (cited in Ravindran 1999: WS-34). Self-respecters challenged the patriarchal culture which not only absolved men from housework but “denied women the dignity of being workers since society held that work was the mark of being a man” (Geetha 1998: WS12). The SRM not only demanded equal pay for both sexes, but also raised the question of wages for housework (ibid.). These questions were practically addressed in the institution of the Self Respect Marriage, in which individual choice was privileged above social or familial preference. This ritual was secular, in that it dispensed with the requirement for priests, and it also encouraged cross-caste alliances and widow remarriage, and demanded reciprocity. The implications of this move were immense. “With women deemed free to marry whomsoever they wished to, the integrity of caste too stood challenged, since caste identity, centred in the woman’s body and consecrated through strategies of control and discipline, could now be exchanged for one that the woman wished to create for herself” (Geetha 1998: WS12. cf. Anandhi 1998: 154). Contemporary political parties in Tamil Nadu lay claim to the legacy of the Self-Respect Movement, but Periyar’s ideals – especially with regard to women - have been compromised or forgotten. Self Respect marriages are still legal, and the state provides financial incentives for cross-caste weddings, but women’s rights remain largely rhetorical and their status is arguably declining. This chapter briefly charts the debates surrounding the question of female autonomy, before considering the position of Dalit women in Tamil Nadu today.

WOMEN IN INDIA: THE WIDER PERSPECTIVE

Portrayals of women’s lives in South Asia frequently present them as the passive subjects of an oppressive social structure, and it is important to highlight the very real structural constraints that women have to overcome. Across India property and

inheritance rights favour males, and it is the men who receive the benefits of education, and the freedoms of association and movement.¹ From a very young age girls are prepared for their 'inevitable marriage' (Jefferys 1996: 6, Caplan: 1985: 41). Fear of threats to their chastity before marriage, and obedience to their husbands thereafter, confines women largely to the domestic sphere (Sharma 1981: 218, Subadra 1999: WS28). In northern states this commonly takes the form of social seclusion within the home (purdah). "The world beyond the domestic arena is basically male space" as Jeffery et al. put it (1989: 23). Socio-cultural norms enforce the belief that women should be subordinate to their male kinsmen.² This gender hierarchy is manifest in the patterns of social interaction whereby women always serve their men's food before eating themselves, stand up when their husband enters a room, or make sure to sit on a lower level. Men are seen as the breadwinners and providers who have the right to make the final decision on any matter (Agarwal 1994: 43, Ravindran 1999: WS37). Land is generally held in the man's name and is passed down from father to son (Agarwal 1994: 2). The patriarchal nature of Indian culture is highlighted by the ritual and social roles assigned to men. Even where a family has no sons, for example, it has to be a male relative who performs the death rites, or presides at marriage ceremonies. As Kapadia (1995: 24) notes, these obligations are often only obtained by ceding half the inheritance of the sonless family to the nearest male relative. The inferiority of women to men is accepted in all castes but there are differences in the degree to which this is the case. Differences in region, caste, and class significantly affect the status of women and these need to be considered.

In a seminal article, Dyson and Moore (1983) depict kinship patterns across India in a series of ideal types that serve to highlight the regional disparities. In part their article is inspired by the work of Miller (1981: 15) who catalogued the existence of a "culture against females" in North India through an analysis of sex ratios, infant mortality rates and fertility figures. Broadly speaking, Dyson and Moore conclude that states in Southern and Eastern India evince lower marital fertility, a later age of marriage, lower infant mortality and relatively low sex ratios as compared to the

¹ On property rights see Agarwal (1994), Jeffery & Jeffery (1996: 10). See Geetha (1998: 320) for the male monopolisation of public space. Kapadia (1995: 13-26) and Daniel (1980: 69) deal with the inferior *status* of women in Tamil culture and within the home. On differences between North and South India see Dyson and Moore (1983).

North (1983: 42, cf. Agarwal 1994: Chapter 1). In their attempt to explain this difference they highlight the socio-economic and cultural factors that characterise the different systems. In the North marriage rules are exogamic – which means that women marry out of the families and villages that they are familiar with into an alien setting (Miller 1981: 14, Dyson and Moore 1983: 43, Agarwal 1994: 1). Due to this, parents can expect little assistance from their married daughters. This helps to explain why women do not generally inherit property, or participate in waged labour. By contrast, marriage patterns in the South encourage cross-cousin matrimony, and affinal relations are as strong as patrilineal ones. The practice of bridewealth is more common and “women sometimes inherit and, or, transfer property rights” (Dyson and Moore 1983: 44). As noted in Chapter 4, the key question is not whether women have a legal entitlement to land, but whether they can exercise control over it (Agarwal 1994: 19). But women are less rigidly controlled in these states, and they frequently engage in waged work outside the domestic sphere. Obviously such generalisations are a caricature that do not do justice to the complexity on the ground, but it seems safe to conclude with Karve that the “South represents ... greater freedom for women” (in Dyson and Moore 1983: 45).

AUTONOMY, AGENCY AND EMPLOYMENT

The differences outlined above have given rise to a debate over the relative autonomy of women in India. Individual autonomy involves having the “freedom to determine one’s own action and behaviour” (Collins ED). It is clear that the normal residential and cultural patterns of family life in India greatly reduce the scope of female autonomy, particularly in areas where women are confined to the domestic sphere. It is, as we have seen, the male householder who is expected to make the decisions and the money. Women frequently criticise this state of affairs, but it can be counterproductive to do so, since obedient wives can hope for lifelong economic support from their husbands, and also avoid being abused (Jeffery and Jeffery 1996: 18, Ravindran 1999: WS38).³ Girls are not consulted about their marriages beforehand, and the family finances are seen as a male affair. In North India cultural

² For more detail see: Daniel (1980: 69), Wadley (1980a: xi), Agarwal (1994: 1, 16), Ravindran (1999: WS37).

³ Subadra (1999: WS28), notes that many women suffer from a “deep and inescapable sense of dependency” since they have “no option” in the matter.

practices serve to limit the contact between a woman and her natal village. Indeed, after the marriage and the costs incurred during that ceremony, many parents regard their work as complete (Agarwal 1994: 1, Jefferys 1996: 6). When this combines with norms of avoidance and prohibitions on work, it is difficult for the woman to establish personal links in the nuptial home and she may be rendered socially powerless – at least until they have children and a daughter-in-law of their own (Wadley 1980a: 27, Dyson and Moore 1983: 48). This isolation is most apparent in cases of dowry related abuse, when a young bride is victimised by her in-laws for having provided too little by way of dowry.⁴ In the South, East and amongst the lower castes by contrast, not only has it been customary to provide a bride-price, but the bride often marries into a close or related family.⁵ The advantages of this arrangement were highlighted by Subadra's study of domestic violence in Chennai. She found that the "parents of the respondent had been the most consistent primary source of support" (1999: WS-33). In such marriages women are not only in closer proximity to their natal homes but a woman maintains her status and a degree of independence due to the equal social standing of the two families (Kapadia 1995: 54). Part of the reason for the greater worth accorded to women in the south and east stems from the fact that women play a far bigger role in agricultural production in these areas (Wadley 1980b: 161, Miller 1981: 14, Dyson and Moore 1983: 47, Ravindran 1999: WS34). Miller (1981: 110) maintains that the higher demand for female labour in rice producing areas, as opposed to areas where wheat is grown, is a significant factor in the regional variations in gender discrimination.⁶

The fact that women are an integral part of the production process in South India, according to Miller (1981), means that they are not seen as a liability to their parents

⁴ The abuse of a young bride because she has brought insufficient dowry can result in murder or suicide. These killings are referred to as 'dowry deaths' and they are common across India (de Souza 1980). The Statistical Handbook of Tamilnadu 1999 notes that the 196 dowry deaths in 1998 constituted four percent of recorded crimes in that year. Given that Tamils used to pay a bride-price for their wives in recognition of their value to the household, this is a worrying development that indicates a decline in the status of women.

⁵ For more detail on this see: Good 1981, Cohn 1990, Berreman 1993, Agarwal 1994, Subadra 1999.

⁶ Whilst attractive, this thesis has been subject to questioning by several authors. As Miller herself notes, there are several exceptions to this rule within India such as West Bengal. Adopting a more nuanced argument, Miller quotes Winzeler to insist that: "in order to make causal inferences about wet rice cultivation it would seem necessary to specify a number of intervening variables including kinship patterns, population density and, perhaps, cultural traditions" (1974: 564). Having said this, the significance of female labour to rice production in the south of India has appeared to influence the cultural attitudes towards female labour.

like they are in the North. Indeed, birth ceremonies and payments to midwives indicate that daughters are often welcomed in the south of India (Wadley 1980b: 161). "Female child labor is a crucial aspect of the Pallar domestic economy", as Kapadia observes. "Homes with daughters count themselves lucky because this frees the Pallar mother for wage work" (1995: 200, Viramma and Racine 1997: 9). The gendered division of labour within the household, however, means that women suffer more as a result of the lack of piped water, fuel stocks, and sanitation facilities. Fetching water, gathering kindling and cooking on a wood stove are all labour intensive. Dalit men rarely assist women in such household tasks, though attitudes are gradually changing (De Souza 1980: 9). The prevalence of women in the labour market in the South means that domestic chores are often in addition to paid employment during the day. The low earnings of unskilled Dalit males means that the women take on agricultural or domestic service jobs "out of sheer economic necessity" (Caplan 1985: 177, Gopal 1999: WS18, Rajuladevi 2000: 476). There is a caste/class differential in the proportion of women from a social category who enter into paid employment.⁷ In general, as Dyson and Moore (1983: 56) note, the higher castes in the South more closely replicate the social dynamics of the Northern system, and women from these castes are withdrawn from the labour market, or confine themselves to ritually neutral jobs. By contrast women from un-propertied or impoverished groups across India consistently participate in wage work.⁸ On one hand the experience of wage labour renders Dalit, lower caste, and poor women far more independent of their men than their higher caste counterparts, but this relative perspective may obscure continuing discrimination. Having an independent source of income does not necessarily equate to an increase in status or decision making power (Agarwal 1994: 44, Kapadia 1995: 20, Ravindran 1999: WS41). Indeed, participation in the labour market substantially increases their workload and reduces their leisure time (Caplan 1985: 34).

⁷ "The women among the Scheduled Castes have a role in all economic and income generation activities, as well as social functions (89.1 percent) and ritual matters (89.5 %). But they have generally a lower status and only a few have decision making powers" (Singh 1993: 7).

⁸ While jobs which used to be the male's preserve have been mechanised, "the very low wages that are paid to women make the mechanisation of female tasks both unnecessary and uneconomic" (Kapadia 1995: 209/210). The rural economy in T.N, thus, has witnessed contradictory trends. The withdrawal of upper caste women from daily agriculture has coincided with the increased 'feminisation' of agrarian labour.

RELATIVE AUTONOMY/ ABSOLUTE RESPONSIBILITY

Their presence in the employment market may accord Dalit women a degree of monetary independence, that is not available to the higher caste women, but it has rendered them extremely vulnerable to exploitation. They are often required to play the role of breadwinner as well as housekeeper. When combined with the much-cited incidence of alcoholism amongst poorer men in India, the burden of responsibility is placed firmly onto women's shoulders (Daniel 1980: 81, Caplan 1985: 10, Berreman 1993: 380, Agarwal 1994: 26, Kapadia 1995: 199, Ravindran 1999: WS41). It is true that Dalit women are less subject to notions of purity and pollution, but this has not resulted in any great degree of liberation for them. Often the clearest manifestation of this relative independence is the fact that Dalit women are expected to work during menstruation and shortly before and after childbirth (Kapadia 1995: 202). There is a common misconception that women's agricultural labour is not particularly 'hard work' (Daniel 1980: 81, Ravindran 1999: WS41). "The Dalit man, while he suffers from caste oppression", as Rani notes, "is not willing to let go of the dominance that this system has given him for being a man" (Rani 1998: WS23). Wherever possible, women are withdrawn from the workforce since it is an indication of low social status for the women of a caste to go to work (Mencher 1988: 106, Jeyaranjan & Swaminathan 1999: WS4). Consequently, the withdrawal of Backward Caste women from work has resulted in a greater demand for Untouchable labour (Epstein 1962: 34, Mencher 1988: 101). Dalit women, according to K. Pawde (1994: 154), are more conscious of their legal rights because of the relative autonomy that their employment affords them. Speaking about the Backward Caste (Kounder) panchayat council in her village, Suganthi highlighted this consciousness: "When a loan for a cow (a government scheme to help the Dalits be more self sufficient) or some other loan arrived, they would never inform us about this. Now we have got to a point where we ask if the loan has come and chase up applications" (Interview 20/03/99). This independence and knowledge of rights, however, is rarely evident in any depth, and *consciousness* about Government programmes remains immaterial so long as these rights are not realised.

II: CONTINUING INEQUALITY AND THE GENDER GAP POVERTY & EDUCATION

Addressing a conference on Dalit women's rights, Vasanthi Devi summed up the main issues: "Farming and agriculture are in your hands, but is the land in your hands? No caste, religion or class gives land into women's hands" (Madurai 10/04/99). This quote also serves to highlight the problematic debate about the merits and demerits of a 'Women's' as opposed to a 'Dalit' movement. The lack of land, it is noted, is an issue that affects all *women*, but the appeal to the tillers of the soil can only refer to *Dalit* or *poor Backward Caste* women since upper caste women do not work the land. "An analysis of the dalits solely in view of caste, for example, may", as Mohanty insists, "in the absence of its location in relation to other social contradictions such as the ones relating to land restrictions, gender inequality, etc., turn out to be a limited exercise" (1998: 72). As women's movements in Chennai found, it makes little sense to agitate for rights when basic needs have not been met (Caplan 1985: 211, Mageli 1997: 10). Many Dalit women and children forfeit an education either to save expense, or because their income generating capacity is required. Thus they are trapped in a vicious circle, since education is increasingly a major determinant of employment options (Dickey 1993: 24, Gopal 1999: WS17). The will of Tamil Dalit women to improve their lot is evinced in their increasing levels of literacy (the figure is still a pitifully low 35% - Government of Tamilnadu 1999, cf. Sebastian 1995: 106). "The downward displacement of ignominious roles and obligations from men to women in Harijan households", however, "indicates the uneven participation of women in social mobility" (Mosse 1994: 86). This disparity in social mobility has recently been emphasized by the experience of Dalit women panchayat presidents. At the first Tamil Nadu Women Panchayat President's Convention, there was consensus that the women had come "a long way from merely slogging it out at home and remaining subservient to men without being able to take any decision" (Krishnakumar: 2000: 98). There was also recognition of the innumerable obstacles that were placed in the way of the women, especially if they happened to be Dalit. Male relatives frequently tried to dominate, and elected male members refused to co-operate. Lack of education hampered women from dealing with files and finances, and this could render them dependent on literate male

members of the council or office-workers (*ibid.*, Pai 2001: 649).⁹ Whilst poverty and a lack of education obviously serve to curtail female autonomy it should be noted that there are far greater threats to women's status.

SUPPRESSION AND SANSKRITISATION

In a footnote to their article on Kinship Structure and Female Autonomy, Dyson and Moore (1983: 56) note that upwardly mobile sections of society across the South were increasingly adopting the characteristics of the North Indian model. This, they warned, would result in a decline of female status and they cited Srinivas as insisting that "Sanskritisation results in harshness towards women" (1983: 56). In a forceful article Berreman (1993: 370) deplores this trend towards sanskritisation. Gender hierarchies, he observes, are strongest among the "sanskritised, traditional segments of Hindu society", and weakest among tribal communities, the urbanised and 'modern' elite, and the lowest castes and classes. Citing his work amongst the Paharis in the far north of India he details the aspects of female autonomy that used to apply in that society. Pahari women were customarily able to officiate as Shamans, they had the freedom to divorce and re-marry and a brideprice was paid for them. Much of this picture applies equally to Dalit women in Tamil Nadu. As little as 15 years ago, respondents asserted, it was customary for Dalit groups to pay a bride price. Since the 1950s, however, there has been an encroachment of Brahminical practices such as "dowry marriages, widow celibacy, male only initiation of divorce" and similar customs which "subordinate and endanger women" (Berreman 1993: 373, Dyson and Moore 1983: 56, Ravindran 1999: WS38). That this is a 'culture against females' (Miller 1981: 15) is evident in the number of female infanticides (FI) across the country. The records of Primary Health Care centres show an average of "around 3,000 cases of FI occur in a year in Tamil Nadu. This amounts to between one-sixth to one-fifth of all female infant deaths in the state" (Athreya and Chunkath 2000: 4345). Patriarchal relations within the household also condition the distribution of child-care. As Harriss-White (1999: 312) observes, girls are increasingly discriminated against in access to nutrition and education. This is despite Wadley's assertion that women in

⁹ C. Mathew, a Christian Dalit and school teacher in his late sixties has been an activist for much of his life and is involved in the Village Community Development Society in Tindivanam. He recalls that the training they provided "enabled 25 Dalit women to be elected in the Panchayat elections, but the benefits of the post were enjoyed by their husbands. The women themselves suffer from social disdain – indeed, any socially active Dalit woman is labelled as a prostitute" (Interview 19/01/99).

the South generally live longer and are more valued than their North Indian counterparts (1980b: 161). As Berreman (1993: 370-1) observes, gender discrimination is at its harshest among the lower sectors of society when they are striving for upward mobility through the symbolic emulation of upper caste norms. In such circumstances the women have neither the material prosperity nor the social status that helps to alleviate the lot of upper-caste women. In this situation, he observes, female autonomy may be enhanced by the process of secularisation, or through the efforts of ethnic, tribal or low caste social movements (1993: 389, Agarwal 1994: 42).

A HOME DIVIDED

Dalit women continue to be the first to suffer: both at the hands of those desiring to humble Dalit men, and at the hands of desperate or alcoholic husbands. In the emerging rural industries, for instance, women's labour is exploited within family, or small-scale, firms that deny them the opportunity to unite (De Souza 1980: 11, Nihila: 1999: WS24, Gopal 1999: WS17). "Women rarely manage economic enterprises", as Harriss-White states, "and more rarely own business property" (1996: 246), and yet they are responsible for accomplishing much of the essential labour of the household. Research throughout India shows the persistence of wage based gender discrimination in the form of large differences in pay, even when the job in question is the same (Kapadia 1995: 212, Nihila 1999: WS6, Rajuladevi 2000: 479)¹⁰. As Dalit women are becoming increasingly prominent in resident's and political organisations, and are making their voices heard, it is impossible to ignore the cross-cutting matrices of domination which constitute contemporary Dalit identity. There is, therefore, an imperative to adopt a gendered perspective in order to challenge the assumptions of conventional economics: (a) "That the household is an undifferentiated unit in which members share common preferences" (Agarwal 1998: A2). Men and women frequently emphasise different priorities and goals, and the 'home' is often the site of violence as a means of social control (Subadra 1999). (b) That income spending patterns within the household are uniform. The contention here is that income in women's hands more commonly benefits the family in general. As Mencher

¹⁰ Some Dalit movements do campaign on this issue. As has been noted elsewhere, one of the key demands of the Working Peasant's Movements is for equal pay for male and female agricultural labourers.

concluded: "The proportion of income contributed by wage-earning women to the household is far higher than that of their earning husbands" (1985: 365, cf. 1988: 99, 109). (c) "That women's class can be derived simply from the family's property status and class position", whereas property laws and wage differentials commonly discriminate against women. Finally, (d) that "the process of intra-household dynamics and allocations" are unproblematic (Agarwal 1998: A2).

III: WOMEN AND SOCIAL ACTION

WOMEN IN PROTEST

The increasing participation of women in panchayats and social movements reflects a growing rejection of their subservient status, and a demand for more autonomy and equality. These sentiments have led women panchayat chiefs to tackle vital problems that affect women on a daily basis: ending the sale of illicit liquor, ensuring the provision of clean water, and enforcing the minimum wage (Krishnakumar 2000: 98-99). More commonly, women do not find themselves in positions of responsibility and must resort to other means to make their opinions heard. Dalit women, thus, feature prominently in the forefront of many demonstration marches and protests by Dalit movements. Given the cumulative nature of the discrimination that they face, such activism is to be expected. Indeed, Tanner (1995) suggests that the group based nature of women's agricultural work helps to explain their greater capacity for collective action. As labourers, housekeepers, and mothers, women feel the brunt of any oppression, whether they are the direct or the indirect targets of any given incident. Social boycotts deprive them of labour and often force children to stay at home, and make it harder to obtain potable water. Hostility between castes renders women vulnerable if they have to use the fields to relieve themselves, work for other castes, or even stay at home whilst their men work elsewhere. The threat and fear of rape and sexual harassment is constant and palpable. Dalit women suffer daily indignities in the form of verbal abuse and exploitation in the work place. Whilst the above are powerful factors that predispose Dalit women towards protest, however, there are equally compelling reasons to render them socially inactive. In the first instance their disproportionate share of the domestic workload results in a 'lack of time' (Caplan 1985: 34). The benefits of social activism are rarely instantaneous, but the costs of protest are immediately apparent. To get to protest meetings or dharnas, one must give up a day's work, possibly find travel expenses, and potentially face

arrest. Childcare is a further complication, as is the risk of inciting the higher castes in one's neighbourhood.

The patriarchal nature of Tamil households dictates that the women do the cooking, fetch the water and collect fuel. Such activities are neglected if a whole day is spent in political activity. Those with servants, as Caplan (1985: 33) notes, are better able to ignore these tasks. However, it is not only poor women who face obstacles to activism, and there are more subtle, structural constraints on women's participation in protest activities. This was made evident at the Centre for Dalit Solidarity conference in American College, Madurai. The audience here was dramatically diminished on the stroke of six O' Clock, as most of the college students departed to get buses home. "Otherwise they will not be allowed to come to college tomorrow", the convenor observed (10/04/99, cf.: Ravindran 1999). Such restrictions seldom apply to male students and they constitute a gender-based constraint on skill-acquisition and political participation (Nagaraj 1999: 90, Subramanian & Harriss-White 1999: 21). The departure of the female students was especially surprising given that the conference was taking place in the campus buildings of their college. Usually Dalit meetings occur on the roadside, or in other public spaces. The gendered geography of social and political space in India acts to confine women to the home (Sharma 1980: 226, Mencher 1988: 114, Geetha 1998a: 320). "Can we stand at a Tea-shop and drink tea?" Viji, a lecturer at the college, asked. "Can a hard working woman coming back from her work stand at a tea-shop and have a drink? Imagine the reaction! 'Look at her! What effrontery! (*Enna Timur*)'". So who are these spaces for? Certainly not for us!" At social movement gatherings the men and women sit apart, for a woman to go to such a gathering on her own would be inconceivable. If transport is required, then other women must be found to travel in consort for reasons of safety and moral propriety. "Indeed for women to even participate in group meetings often requires them to challenge and overcome the constraints of social norms, to face the disapproval and wrath of their husbands and other family members" (Agarwal 1994: 43). Whilst some women activists have overcome the cultural barriers to political participation and frequently address meetings attended mostly by males, the majority of women lack the confidence to voice their opinions in such an environment.

WOMEN'S WINGS: DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALISATION?

Partly in response to this, most movements have a Women's Wing that is intended to raise issues that pertain to Dalit women. This division of labour enables the mobilisation of many more women than would otherwise be the case, and also brings household issues onto the agenda. Members for such movements are recruited through informal, local support networks, credit unions and friendships. Women's work, as Tanner (1995: 690) points out, is more community based, and there are more opportunities for women to gather and debate issues on a daily basis than for men. Queues for water, rations shops, and so on are places where grievances are felt and solutions discussed. Given the domestic division of labour it is unsurprising that it is the Women's Wings that highlight the problems faced in ration shops, and with moneylenders. "We are not a separate movement", Pandiyammal of Tamilnadu Women's Liberation Movement insisted, "we are in the Liberation Panther movement and we attend their meetings in groups of one hundred women or so". The differences between the separate branches of the organisation were evinced, however, when she went on to add; "we campaign on women's issues too" (Interview 28/03/99). "By treating important societal issues such as the collection of fuel, fodder and drinking water as 'women's issues'", as Mageli observes, "these issues become, from a male point of view, issues of low priority" (1997: 4). The work of the women's branches is presented as less urgent than that of the movement 'proper' and issues of importance to women can then be downplayed. The women's branches only come into their own when the main movement is unable to stage protests for fear of repression, or when a gathering of women is deemed to be more poignant. After the election violence in Chidambaram, for example, the women's meetings sent out a message that the Dalit community was scared of violence, and that innumerable Dalit men had been arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. It was at these meetings that the women's leaders were given a platform, and accorded responsibility.

WAITING IN THE WINGS: DALIT WOMEN LEADERS

Whilst women are present in large numbers at the meetings of the main movement, their leaders are rarely accorded the respect and prominence that they deserve at such events. Adline is a graduate from the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary and a local leader in the Madurai branch of the Women's Rights Movement (*Penurimai Iyyakam*). She notes that "Dalit movements as a rule neither respect Dalit women nor

use them properly". Several movements, as she notes, have upper caste women running their Women's Wings. She cites the instance of the Dalit Liberation Movement. The leader of the movement approached the PI asked them to provide legal training for the DLM women. When they initiated the programme, however, they found that "these women knew more about the law and the implementation of certain Acts than we knew, because they had had practical experience of taking cases to the police and knew far more than we did. They did not need legal training", Adline concluded, "they needed recognition" (interview 01/10/99). They needed to be used in the struggle, but the general perception that Dalit women are uneducated hindered their involvement. Similarly, Thirumavalavan, the leader of the Dalit Panther Movement displayed a startling lack of knowledge about the distaff side of the organisation. When asked for a point of contact in Madurai, "he thought for some time and then mentioned the wife of their legal advisor. She *is* a good woman and she does get involved, but she is neither a Dalit nor a member of the movement. The worst part of the response was that Pandiyammal Akka was there when we were speaking – a talented leader of the Women's wing who has all the required stuff – but he didn't mention her" (ibid).

IV: IDEOLOGICAL EQUALITY, ACTUAL INERTIA

RHETORICAL RIGHTS AND PREJUDICED PRACTICE

When it was pointed out that all the movements espouse an ideological commitment to the equality of women, Adline was dismissive: "Of course! Without them there is no protest! They are the bulk of the protestors aren't they?!" (Interview 01/10/99). While male activists are in favour of women's liberation in principle, as Dietrich (1988: 7) points out, their own lifestyles and expectations are often traditional. As a consequence their interaction with women activists is coloured by their domestic relationships with mothers, sisters, and wives.¹¹ Daniel (1980: 66) notes the prevalent Tamil belief that males should exercise control over their kinswomen. Certainly, the commitment of many activists is dependent upon having someone to provide food at

¹¹ This 'traditional' approach among the male leaders of the Dalit movements was evinced in the style that they chose to adopt at political meetings. Standing at the front of the crowd, often on a stage, the senior figures of the movement lectured the crowds in didactic fashion. Whilst the audience of such speeches was the members of the movement, however, the speakers frequently faced away from those ranged behind them and addressed themselves to the street. In the context this was intended to symbolise an attempt to reach out to passers-by and bystanders, and also allowed the press to snap up

home, not to mention their earnings. It would be mistaken however, to deny that there is a genuine awareness of the need for women's rights in the Dalit movements. At the wedding of the Madurai district organiser Murugan, for example, Thirumavalavan wound up his speech by insisting that "women are not just wombs, or machines that give birth. They also have desires, wants and dreams, and they also have the fire to fight for a just cause. If this is understood, then this family will be based on equal authority with two heads of the household – Murugan and Jayanthi" (16/06/99). Though the echoes of the Self-respect Movement are obvious, it is easy to see this as a cynical appeal to Jayanthi not to hinder Murugan's social activism. 'TADA' Periyasami, the Assistant state convenor of the Liberation Panthers, was more explicit: "If one enters into social activism one can do nothing without the consent of your wife. I know that without my wife's approval I couldn't have become so involved. There are times when I get news of a riot or a caste clash that needs an urgent response. If my wife held me back at that point then the moment will pass and I would be unable to go to the spot, see the riot and face it out ... Households often intend this, they hope that the wife will shackle the lad and calm him down. For example my father wanted to settle me down, since I had joined in a naxalite, a militant group in my student days" (Talk: 16/06/99).

A SPACE IN THE STRUGGLE

Whether cynical or not, the liberatory rhetoric and the need to gain a wife's support serves to temper the male chauvinism of the movement activists and raises the consciousness of the Dalit women. Most movements do require an internal critique of patriarchy (Rege 2000: 494), but it is important to note that the discourse on equality and women's rights does create significant 'spaces within the anti-caste struggle' (Sen 1990). Dalit women at ground level, as Rege points out, "sometimes challenge the patriarchal leadership, making spaces for feminism within the dalit movement" (2000: 494). It is significant, in this light, that not only do most Dalit movements have a Women's Wing, but that the Liberation Panthers and the Dalit Liberation Movement, at least, have co-operated and worked with Penurimai Iyakkam on several issues. The very experience of social organisation, and the provision of networks of fellow activists, acts to make women more confident in the public sphere. "Apart from

images of the leader during the speech. By contrast, at the women's movement meetings there was more of a participatory emphasis and the leaders faced into and interacted with the crowd.

marches, demonstrations and conferences which take place regularly in many places, the day to day organisational efforts in local women's *sanghams* (unions) are therefore of greater importance than their often limited scope suggests. It is these sanghams that can deal with issues like drinking, wife-beating, rape, health problems and *balwadis* (nurseries). Such activities are often essential to equip women to be involved in any political process" (Dietrich 1988: 34). The picture is not always so rosy, as Egnor (1980: 27) observes, for women are often culpable in reinforcing the very hierarchies that suppress them. She insists, however, that there remains a strong 'consciousness of solidarity' among Tamil women (1980: 27). The gender-based separation of movements enables the greater participation of women, and allows household disputes and other local issues to be heard and tackled in a protective environment.

PERSONAL AND POLITICAL: LOANS, CREDIT AND RATION SHOPS

"Women have more responsibilities and household expenditure", Amulakka insisted, "so they need more help than the men" (Interview 16/03/99). Amulakka is a middle aged Dalit woman living in a village 20 miles outside Madurai. She and her husband work on an estate where they manage the coconut groves. She is also the accountant for the DPI Women's Wing in her area because she was educated up to 9th grade in school. "We saw that all loans available here were for a huge amount of interest, and we questioned why we were forced to use such loan sharks. So, we have started up this union for ourselves. Here in this district we have 15 members. Once a month we contribute Rs.20/- which enables us to provide small loans at a low rate of interest" (ibid.). Similar schemes are in evidence in most women's movements, which tend to be closer to ground level than the male equivalents. It is also a reflection of the main issues that exercise the minds of their constituents. Poverty, corruption at the ration shop, and the poor quality of ration shop produce, were recurrent themes raised by Dalit women. Whilst Pandiyammal told of a similar credit scheme, she also insisted that their efforts had secured respect for the participants. "In our area there are no husbands who drink and beat their wives" she claimed (28/03/99). Muniamma, an elderly and illiterate flower seller, agreed: "this movement has given us boldness" she affirmed (Interview 28/03/99). The notices for women's meetings reflect their core concerns and raise the issues of food, fuel, schooling and loan sharks. In so doing these movements serve to give Dalit women a voice and means of airing their

grievances that would not otherwise be available to them. They also provide a forum in which to raise issues of domestic violence and alcoholism and secure some form of mediation.

CONCLUSION

Dalit movements need to integrate both male and female facets of their organisation if they are to maximise their potential. Whilst the movements continue to be split into gendered halves, the problems of internal patriarchy will remain. Male leaders, as shown in the next chapter, need to know more about their female counterparts and their concerns, and recognise their importance. Were Dalit movements to tackle the issues of excessive drinking, wife-beating and ration shops, they would be able to tap into a wider constituency than they do at present. The popularity of the AIADMK amongst women is in large part due to its policies of prohibition, food subsidies, and the midday meal scheme for school children (Swamy 1996: 202). "Money earned outside by men rarely reaches the home", according to Vasanthi Devi. "The great problem of drink falls hardest on the heads of the women, and until this is eradicated there cannot be true liberation for women" (Conference 10/04/99). Education, in its broadest sense, is the key to this enterprise, both to make women more confident and assertive, and to encourage men to alter their behaviour (Sen 1997: 14, Subadra 1999: WS32).¹² A change in world view and life-style practices, it should be stressed, is neither utopian nor unprecedented. As we have seen, the lower castes had a higher esteem for women, but Sanskritisation has resulted in the adoption of higher caste customs such as dowry.¹³ "We had a more egalitarian, respectful and fair culture but we have changed it" as Vasanthi Devi insists. A. Marx, an academic commentator on the Dalit movement, stressed the differences between women when he spoke at the Centre for Dalit Solidarity Conference: "Dalit women's problems are different from those of others", he said, "and it is important that we understand this". Other speakers, however, were less convinced about this position. Nasreen, a university lecturer, and Kameswari, a landless labourer, spoke of sexual and physical abuse within the home and the problems of drink. The multiple strands of oppression - caste, class and

¹² In an article on Female Infanticide, Athreya and Chunkath (2000) stress the importance of education in the attempt to combat the practice, and highlight the successes of a government funded street theatre programme that raised awareness of the issues involved.

¹³ This is evinced in the practice of paying a bride price, which recognises the value of the daughter to a home.

gender – were presented as intertwined in their commentaries.¹⁴ The delineation of identities is an act of boundary setting which obscures the multiple identities of individuals who may be Dalits, women, exploited workers and Paraiyars at the same time. Privileging the Dalit/non-Dalit binary, thus, merely downplays the patriarchal structures that Dalits themselves perpetuate. The Self-Respect Movement in Tamilnadu castigated the nationalist movement for adopting higher caste norms with regard to women. Periyar's politics sought a free and equal citizenship for diverse (not single) social groups such as Backward Castes, Dalits and Women. Dalit movements have continued this tradition in giving women a voice that has frequently been denied them but, as we shall see in the next chapter, the leader-centred nature of most movements is far from egalitarian. It is important, therefore, for these groups to recognise the value and autonomy of Dalit women and to learn the lessons that they teach.

¹⁴ Dalit men highlight the suffering of their women as emphasising the brutality of the upper castes. Karunakaran, a political activist from Andhra Pradesh, waxed lyrical; "Dalit women, beautiful Dalit women, more beautiful than these here (pointing to his relatives), have to suffer with no secure or private bathing facilities. Out in these open spaces they fall prey to the lust of higher caste men" (Interview 13/10/99). All too often, however, it is Dalit men who are guilty of sexual violence or discrimination against women (Geetha 1999, Subadra 1999).

CHAPTER SEVEN: LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP

Movement Organisation and Membership Debates

I: INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP

LEADERS AND LED

I had travelled for three hours in a rickety bus, asked countless people for directions and had walked a couple of kilometres to find the hall, so I was somewhat chagrined when there was nothing happening. The notice for the event had clearly stated nine O'clock in the morning, so I had arrived around ten. The venue was obviously the right one as the flags of the Dalit Liberation Movement fluttered on the approach road to the Assembly Hall. There was also a small knot of members who had, like me, assumed that the event would get under way within at least an hour of the stated time. We were mistaken but I started to talk to the gathered members about the movement and their experiences, and to answer their questions about what a white person was doing in the middle of nowhere. Our conversations were interrupted around 11.30 when a van of movement leaders drew up, ascended the stage and started the speeches that we had all come so far to hear. ... At least that was what I had assumed, until my neighbour leaned over and asked if I would like to accompany him to the Tea Shop. "But", I protested, "the speeches have begun, do you not want to stay and listen?" His response was as typical as it was instructive: "This is boring", he declared, "when Annan turns up there will be some interest". 'Annan' is the Tamil word for elder brother, and it is the appellation by which most movement leaders are known to their followers. The fictive kinship it establishes is common in India and all the speakers on stage would have been addressed as 'elder brother'. Whereas their names would have used to prefix the term, however, the leaders are distinguished from the lesser lights of the organisation by being known simply as 'big brother'. 'Annan', as a form of address on its own could only mean one person.

The Dalit Liberation Movement (DLM) is not alone in this respect. When the leader of the Liberation Panthers, Mr.R.Thirumavallavan, was indisposed for four months, the attendance at protests dropped, and many meetings, ceremonies, and even weddings were postponed. It was not that the movement could not have gone ahead with these programmes, but that the people involved were unwilling to deny themselves a visit by the leader. There was also the view that no such event would be

complete without his presence. In short, leaders dominated all the movements which I surveyed, and were ubiquitous even in absence as members constantly referred to them, displayed pictures of them or played tapes of the latest speeches. Not all movements were centred round a *single* leader. The Tamilaga Dalit Liberation Movement (TDLM) had deliberately attempted to create a structure that avoided the problems of over-centralisation, by forming a leadership committee of five people, all of whom had to ratify any decision. This more participatory structure and ethos was a consequence of, and reaction to, the previous leader's perceived abuse of power. The Women's Movements, which were discussed in the previous chapter, also tried to avoid the worst excesses of centralisation though certain leader-figures played key roles. The issue of leadership, therefore, is a crucial one. Certainly, when questioned why they favoured one particular movement over others, adherents usually cited the leader as the attraction. Given this, the number of Dalit movements in Tamil Nadu suggests a wealth of leadership talent in the community. The picture, however, is more complex. It must be stressed that a 'Great Leader' did not necessarily have to possess great qualities of leadership. Divisions within the Dalit community mean that belonging to the right caste or sub-caste often carry as much weight as the calibre of the candidate. The attractiveness of a central figure, as Dickey observes, "is determined more by aspects such as personal nature and even family background than by physical features, although the latter may certainly help" (1993: 349). I do not wish to suggest that there are no meritorious Dalit leaders in the state, far from it, the intention is merely to raise the issue of leadership. Most Dalit movements in Tamilnadu are centralised around a dominant figure who plays the part of chief decision-maker, chief orator, chief spokesperson for the movement, and chief hero of the masses. "Who do you think is the best Dalit leader?" – was a question which I was frequently asked. Understanding the culture and dynamics of leadership, therefore, is central to understanding contemporary Dalit movements.

LEADERSHIP IN CONTEXT

"Indian political institutions", as Mageli shows, "are marked by *factionalism*, dividing but not necessarily breaking up an organisation; *personality focus*, with the leader assuming a powerful position; and *clearly defined hierarchical and authoritarian structures*, with little internal democratic functioning, expressed within a framework of patron-client relationships" (1997: 26). Since all social movements are influenced

and shaped in interaction with the socio-political environment from which they emerge, any analysis of Dalit leadership needs to be placed within this context. In his study of social movements and institutions throughout India, Bonner concludes that the poor have yet to “shed the inferiority born of centuries of caste oppression and the belief in Karma” (1990: 2). Used as they are to receiving orders, according to de Wit, “slum people seek to establish personalistic ties and seldom, if ever, do they form associations in relation to ideological commitments” (1996: 51).¹ It is a truism that power creates inequality, so it hardly surprising that “it is the leadership [of a social movement] which promotes the pursuit of goals, develops strategies and tactics for action, and formulates an ideology” (Melucci 1996: 332). In Tamil politics party members often identify themselves as subservient disciples in decidedly uneven leader-follower relationships (Mines 1994: 40, Price 1996: 15, Chandhoke 1999, Widlund 2000: 19). Monarchical political values continue to inform political interaction (Price 1996: 43). Frequently the omnipotent leaders are characterised as ‘charismatic’ figures that can attract a personal following. In her study of leadership in Tamilnadu Widlund echoes this characterisation but then observes that “winning elections goes beyond charismatic values. *It’s also about mobilising voters, manning booths, keeping the depredations of others in check* (Outlook Comment in Widlund 2000: 367). The uncritical adoption of the concept of charisma, however, as we shall see, serves to obscure the complexity of the social relationships that underlie leadership. Applying the findings from studies of Tamil politics to Dalit movements could also be problematic. As Deliège found, the Paraiyars evinced a general antipathy to authority *within* the caste. “The internal organisation of the Paraiyars”, he asserts, “forestalls the development of hierarchy within Paraiyar society itself, by maintaining egalitarian structures” (1997: 33). Paraiyars are depicted as so segmented and jealous of each other, that “it would take a superior personality to be able to assert himself as a respected leader of all” (Ibid. 40).

¹ Mines (1994: 79) notes the importance of establishing trust through personalised ties in India. Although he observes that these ties are increasingly being replaced by impersonal contractual relationships, personalised trust and connections are still highly significant determinants of social and economic success.

II: POWER RELATIONS: THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF LEADERSHIP CHARISMA AND INSPIRATION

Since the completion of Delière's fieldwork the emergence of several coherent Dalit movements in Tamil Nadu has prioritised the question of leadership. Such movements cannot claim to speak for all Dalits, nor even all the members of a particular caste, but they have succeeded in uniting significant numbers of people. The prominence of the central leaders, and the difficulties in organising the Dalit population, casts them in the light of 'superior personalities' and renders the concept of 'charisma' an attractive analytical means of understanding contemporary Dalit mobilisation. "Charisma", according to Weber, denoted a "certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (1964: 358). These qualities were said to be bestowed on a leader by some supernatural force, and charismatic individuals were said to be 'inspired'. Weber opined that the *Bhakti* tradition had produced a number of 'inspired' Untouchable figures, but the leaders today cannot be said to be charismatic in this sense of the term.² Part of their appeal is that they are "one of us", they are Dalits who have experienced discrimination and hardship in their own lives but have risen above that to fight on behalf of their people. It is arguable, however, that they *do* possess charismatic qualities in the sense of the term used by Geertz. Geertz (1983) argues that charisma is conferred by virtue of association with cultural values that are at the heart of the society in question. By appropriating the discourses of human rights, the constitution, and democratisation, Dalit leaders place themselves at the heart of contemporary Indian politics. Geertz's conceptualisation of charisma retains the analytical utility of the term without falling into the popular conception of charisma, which is indistinguishable from personal magnetism. This notion of 'centrality' helps to explain the tension between the ideal of political equality and the reality of dominant leaders.

The relationship between a leader and their followers bears a strong resemblance to patron-client alliances.³ "These alliances", according to Mageli, "are vertical and

² The *Bhakti* tradition refers to devotional Hindu cults that emphasised an individual's relationship to God. Through great devotion and piety, untouchables such as Nandanar gained the favour of the Gods.

³ Patron-Client ties are dyadic relationships, depending to some degree on personal, face to face contact between the Patron and the client. Patron-Client relationships are predicated upon a norm of reciprocity and mutual advantage (Lande 1977). For the poor and the weak, in the absence of institutional

imply that political mobilisation takes place when a charismatic leader manages to recruit followers for his cause, rather than when a group of people mobilise because of shared abstract interests" (1997: 27). Articulated in this manner, the concept of charisma serves to negate the conscious action of the followers. By overemphasising the charismatic aspects of leadership, as Melucci rightly notes, "the nature of the social relationship of leadership tends to become blurred, because one of the terms of the relation, the masses, is annulled as an actor" (1996: 336). Charismatic leadership, in other words, cannot be analysed in isolation from the social relations that give it significance. Indeed, as Boholm argues, "for a charismatic leader to be able to produce messages which his intended audience will understand and accept, they must be recognised in terms of already familiar cultural presuppositions" (1996: 12). Leadership, in other words, has to be legitimated and created *socially* – it cannot be divinely ordained. Charismatic leadership describes a specific form of social exchange between the leader and his/her followers. The followers endow a leader with political power, prestige and recognition, but the rules of exchange demand an aspect of reciprocity. "If objectives are not achieved, or if a request for investment is met with insufficient response", as Melucci observes, "the leader incurs the disapproval of the group, and loss of support" (1996: 334). It is these relations of reciprocity, as Lande notes, that "distinguish a dyadic alliance from a contractual one in which the obligations of the contracting parties are clearly delimited" (1977: xv). Pitt-Rivers' description of Patron-Client relationships as 'lop-sided friendships' is particularly apt. The links that bind a leader to their followers, in other words, are not neutral and they can often constitute a bond of mutual devotion. The conception of charisma as a form of divinely inspired leadership, therefore, can reveal little about the type of relations that tie actors together. Whilst political institutions in Tamil Nadu exhibit a strong focus on personality, their leaders are not immune to suggestion and influence from below. "No matter how strong a leader's public image", as Dickey points out, "voter support can be lost if an opponent provides assistance while the

provisions for the safeguarding of their livelihood, the influential support of the patron is perhaps the most important facet of the alliance. Clients, however, are expected to fulfil their obligations to the patron through the expenditure of labour and effort, or through political and social support. It is a social relation of affection and loyalty that imitate familial bonds and is often cemented by the creation of fictive kinship (Scott 1977).

leader ignores voter's needs" (1993: 352, cf. Mines 1994: 57, Subramanian 1999: 9, Widlund 2000: 26).⁴

LEADER-CENTRED GROUPS

Much contemporary social movement analysis downplays the role of the leader, choosing to focus on group dynamics instead. Indeed, many Western accounts depict 'new social movements' as essentially participatory and democratic organisations. In so far as leadership is discussed it is presented as a relationship in which the movement members and goals are as likely to shape the leader as the reverse. It would be misleading to present Dalit movements as being embodied in the personage of the leader. Most movement leaders do not have access to a resource base that would allow them to distribute patronage. Consequently their authority rests upon their ability to represent their member's interests (cf. Prasad & Bechain 2000). As we have seen, reciprocity is an essential feature of the leadership relationship. Most Dalit movements had mechanisms that allowed debate and dissent, and some, such as the Liberation Panthers, had an established and able secondary leadership. It would also be erroneous to suggest that the role of the leader in Dalit movements is uniform, or that the many Dalit leaders act according to any preconceived and recognised guidelines on leadership. Each leader had their particular style, approach, and following. The followers in question are not hermetically sealed off from the leadership, and they obviously help to influence their style and strategy. The constituents of a movement are the bricks upon and with which the ideology, strategy, cohesion and image of a movement are constructed. The members of any movement have the ultimate sanction of being able to switch allegiance to another organisation or refrain from political activity. The different approaches of the leaders, thus, are often reflected in the social composition of the movement. As the Ambedkar People's Movement lost its radicalism many of the younger members of the movement opted to join the Liberation Panthers (DPI) instead. The DPI refer to themselves as a Dalit organisation and hope to attract followers from all the SCs. Others, such as the Devendra Kula Vellallar Union (a Sanskritised epithet for the Pallar community), and the Paraiyar Peravai (Front), however, insisted that one had to 'put one's own house

⁴ In her study of Andhra Pradesh, Robinson notes that participation in the electoral process caused voters to make more demands of their candidates than they had previously done (1988: 259).

in order' before uniting together.⁵ How much these positions are dictated by the leadership is hard to assess, but activists assert their commitment to their chosen movement and define themselves in terms of it. Consequently, as we shall see, when the DPI attempted to alter its position the leadership met with fierce resistance from the movement cadre.

It is axiomatic that no one person constitutes a movement since a certain mass is required for a movement to be defined as such. Where this leader is not regarded as a prophet or inspired leader, therefore, they will have to take cognisance of the member's opinions. Influence of necessity is a two way process. "In reality", as Melucci notes, "in a complex network of exchanges, influence circulates as a variously distributed resource and becomes also a property of minorities with the ability to assert themselves" (1996: 337, cf. Foucault 1980: 98). It is possible, however, for one central figure to *symbolise* the organisation that they represent, or to dominate the social imagination about that movement. Such symbolism is a powerful mechanism that serves to link individual and collective action together. An admiration for, adulation of, or belief in a central figure can serve to unite disparate individuals around common themes. The ubiquitous references to the leader help to give cohesion to this 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983). The central figures are presented to the public, by the media and the government, as the only known face of the movement, and as its only recognised voice.⁶ This focus not only obscures the organisational dynamics of the movement, it also means that the movement members themselves gravitate around the leader who can articulate their demands to a wider audience. Meetings at which the leader was present attracted a larger following and, thus, more media coverage. Hence, there is a widespread idea that an event is only worthwhile if the leader is present. Time and again meetings, protests and ceremonies were abandoned or postponed until such time as the leader became available.⁷ The

⁵ The slogan of the Peraiyar Peravai may be loosely translated as: "We will build our houses, They can build theirs. On common issues we will unite".

⁶ In 'Charisma and Leadership in Organisations', Alan Bryman provides a chronology of approaches to the study of leadership. "The trait approach emphasises the personal qualities of leaders and implies that leaders are born rather than made" (Bryman, 1992, 1). It tries to establish what physical characteristics, abilities and personality features distinguish them from non-leaders. This approach however ignores the learning process that each prospective leader has to go through. Once a leader has been established, however, both media and movement members tend to focus upon them, they thus become the 'face' of the movement.

⁷ The ties that bind a member to a leader are not forged of steel, but must be renewed at each successive event. When he returned from a lengthy illness, Thirumavallavan attended weddings, flag-

leader is not only the ultimate point of reference, but also the ultimate source of authority. Mines (1994: 41) refers to such organisations as 'leader-centred groups'. Individuals in Tamil Nadu, he insists, primarily think of the self in relation to others. The individuality of public figures is defined by the "superiority of leaders over their followers" (1994: 40). The position of the leader is vested with 'imperative control'. That is: "The probability that a command within a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of people" (Weber 1964: 152). This authority is tempered by the fact that "a leader must circumscribe his or her successes with a reputation for altruism, honesty and commitment to the collective good of the community", in order to avoid accusations of venality (Mines 1994: 42).

III: MEETING THE LEADER, ESTABLISHING THE MOVEMENT

THE 'ELDER BROTHER'S' VISIT

The leaders of the biggest movements reside in Madras. Although it is far from central as a geographic location, it is the centre of political power in Tamil Nadu. The ubiquity of recorded speeches, photographs, and even videotapes, however, has "not obviated the need for the personal appearance and the personal favour" (Dickey 1993: 353). When a locality first pledges its allegiance to the movement, therefore, this affinity is solemnised by a brief visit from the leader. During this initial contact the leader unveils the insignia of the movement. Of course, most leaders are too busy to go around raising flags every time a new area joins the movement. Instead, they wait until sufficient number of units in one area wish to join, then the leader spends two to three days in a non-stop tour.⁸ On arrival at a flag-raising ceremony, the leader will usually spend some time talking to the local people about the issues affecting them. Where time permits this involves a 'tour' of the area, and often eating in one of the local houses or halls. This contact is crucial to cement the leader's place in the hearts

raisings, and meetings to explain his absence and apologise. At least two weddings in the Madurai area had been postponed pending his arrival.

⁸ I was involved in one such flag-raising tour around Ramnad District. The DPI were inaugurating several villages into the movement. The leader was due to speak in Emmeneswaram village at four O'Clock, but he did not arrive till ten. At four all the local activists piled into two vans and drove out to meet the leader. The vans were packed to capacity with youths, many of whom had been drinking. When we met up with the leader's convoy in Manamadurai we formed a group of two cars, two jeeps and four vans. In procession we visited two local branches, where Thirumavallavan dismounted from his vehicle, raised the flag of the movement and went for a walk around the local area to meet the members and listen to their problems. We then drove for a further forty minutes to a village, where a few speeches were made and the flag raised once more. Finally we drove back to Emmeneswaram

and minds of the people. The personal intimacy of such an occasion reinforces the fictive kinship expressed in the term 'Annan', and also safeguards leaders from accusations of arrogance. Such appearances ensure that the figurehead of the movement is not only a name in lights, but also someone whom most of the leaders have either met or seen in close proximity. Direct contact with the leaders gives the members a sense of personal recognition and importance (Dickey 1993a: 353, Widlund 2000: 187). These events are often highlights in an area's collective imagination. By raising the flag of a particular movement and meeting the leader, the local populace is able to redefine their identity. The festive atmosphere, the raising of the flag and the visit of the leader enables the Dalits of such a locality to assert who they are, and their rejection of the status quo.

Usually people in a locality contacted a movement after some form of caste discrimination or conflict, but meetings could also be prompted by an increase in consciousness. The important point to note here is that they are the ones who make contact. At an early juncture, therefore, they place themselves in a position of weakness or dependency with regard to the organisation. The activists who respond to calls for assistance reinforce this imbalance of power between the movement and its members. The activists visit the area in question and 'take classes' which deal with the aims, ideals and history of the movement, usually provide information about Ambedkar and their own leader, and highlight the mutual responsibility of the movement and the members. There is, thus, a pedagogic aspect to movement activism and new recruits expect the movement leadership to guide them through complex socio-political issues. When the local group are ready to be inducted into the movement, they erect the emblems of the movement in their locality. Unless they have been to meetings elsewhere, or have been subject to violence serious enough for the movement to approach the area, the first time they will actually meet the leader whom they will have heard so much about is during the 'flag-raising ceremony' (*Kodi aettru villa*).

where food was provided for all, and the leader was allowed some respite before ascending the stage to begin speeches.

SYMBOLIC LEADERSHIP

At such events it is the leader who steps forward to raise the flag and who explains what it represents. The relationship thus established between the leader and the defining symbol of the movement is reinforced by the choreography of the occasion. There is almost always a stage erected under an awning. The 'big men' or women of the movement are not only elevated physically but also provided with chairs from which they are visible to all. The movement members range themselves in front of the dais seated occasionally on benches, but more frequently on rough blankets, sheets of newspaper, or their chappals, as they listen to the speeches that are relayed over loud speakers. Where no stage has been constructed, a semi-circle is formed around the leaders who occupy the most visible and important places facing outwards. Usually a microphone will be installed and each successive orator is in close proximity with the leader when they make their speeches. Where new branches of the movement are inaugurated, headstones erected, or buildings and statues constructed, the process is initiated by a dedication and the name of the leader is etched or painted onto stone plaques or wooden boards that document the visit of the person. "Each of these", as Dickey notes, "is a reciprocal event; the presence of the politician, or any respected person, also bestows honour on the ceremony or occasion" (1993a: 350). Hence, as we have seen, the obsession with photo opportunities that document the presence of members at any such event.

IV: THE EXPERIENCE OF LEADERSHIP

MY LEADER, MY HERO

The DPI activist, Anandan, spoke of the difficulties of movement activism – of court cases, violence and of being 'on duty' the whole time. The temptation to give up, he states, is compelling. When questioned as to why he remained committed to the movement despite such difficulties, he revealed that: "when people knock on my door at 12 o'clock at night because of some problem, I do not think; 'Oh these people!' At that time I think of my leader – who protests 24 hours a day for my people" (Anandan, SMP Colony, 23/03/99). Those leaders who remain aloof from the people, who do not enter the *cheris*, or dismount from their Air-Conditioned cars, are mocked and depicted as self-interested individuals out to feather their own nests. The 'good' movement leader is always on call. It was said of Louis XVIII that his life was a public spectacle. The same could be asserted of some movement leaders. When

Thirumavallavan is having a pee by the roadside, there are some ten to twenty people ranged alongside. When he is having a wash in the morning there are messages relayed through the door, or the newly acquired mobile phone is passed into the room. When he is in transit the Tata Sumo in which he is seated is usually packed even by Indian standards, and is often one in a convoy of crowded vehicles.⁹ The schedule imposed upon such leaders is draining, and it was not uncommon to see leaders dozing off during the other speeches. The emphasis on experience, and on 'being one with the people' places a heavy burden on the leader figures.

MIDDLE CLASS LEADERSHIP

It is obvious that the leader is central to the movement, so what sets them apart from the crowd? They were mostly educated, well versed in law, and capable of speaking at length on a platform. They are seen as representatives of the people who articulate their woes and aspirations. It was often noted that the most prominent movement leader, Thirumavallavan, is the best orator as well. According to Nambath, the Dalits initially eulogised "criminal elements who indulged in isolated acts of violence against the oppressor caste for personal ends ... But in time the leadership of the community (has) passed on to organisations which systematically and therefore effectively, resisted caste oppression" (Hindu: May 25, 1997). What this has entailed is a class differentiation within the movements, with the more educated sections taking the lead in the struggle. Sathai Baikiaraj, the leader of the All India Paraiyar Peravai, would be an example of the more violent style of leadership. His short, populist, and invariably violent speeches meet with rousing applause. Yet even he, who calls himself 'Bomb Baikiaraj', has been forced to take a more muted approach of late.¹⁰ There is a growing awareness that such isolated action cannot achieve a solution to the issues which Dalit movements are trying to address. The more popular leaders, therefore, are those who are educated, articulate and socially respectable. Dr. Krishnasamy was a practising cardiologist who gave up his surgery to fight for the Dalits. Thirumavallavan was a highly paid government administrator until he resigned his post to contest the elections. Daniel Gnanasekaran, of the DLM, is an ordained

⁹ All the leaders whom I interviewed kept an open house, and were frequently inundated by movement members who desired an audience with the leader.

¹⁰ Interview with Guruvijay Paraiyar 10/10/99: "We were a violent mob who used to inspire fear in people, but we have reduced that tendency ... Sathai Baikiaraj will turn up and explode bombs if

pastor with a BD in Theology. Thirumavallavan emphasised the significance of educated members of the Dalit community and the responsibility that they have to assume. “It is this white-collar sector alone”, he stressed, “which is the force that can decide the future of the marginalised Dalits. ... If government servants do not think about these people or their future, then not only another thousand years, but many thousands of years may pass before these people are able to raise their heads” (Thirumavallavan Speech, 01/12/99. cf. Corbridge & Harriss 2000: chapter 9).

This sentiment is not born of middle class intellectual arrogance; it is an awareness of the poverty of the Dalit masses. Those without the means to eat, it is argued, may partake in – but do not have the means to lead – a social revolution.¹¹ This approach is problematic and can prompt movements to develop a ‘project mentality’ that is more concerned with tangible results in the form of houses built, protests held or cases won, than with the empowerment of the people. Organisations involved in relief work for women in Madras, often “created in them a sense of helplessness and dependency on outsiders” (Mageli 1997: 49). As Kothari argues; “merely organising the poor” into different activities has little effect. The emphasis must be upon socially empowering the people through the provision of education, public health facilities, housing and environmental enhancement (1995: 73). “To drag these people out of the mire in which they have been enslaved”, Thirumavallavan asserts, “one needs a clear sighted movement ... one with the patience to explain its ideology to the people” (Speech 01/12/99). Since the majority of activists stem from the lower sections of society, and many are illiterate, there is often a paternalist aspect to movement work. Although many movement leaders are from the middle classes, however, the majority of the more educated and affluent activists are involved in NGOs that can pay them for their services. They work *for*, rather than *with*, the Dalit people.

ONE OF US

The schism that might be expected to develop between movement cadre and the leadership due to the differences in class and education are elided by a strong “network of affiliation and socialisation” (Melucci 1996: 335). For promising

necessary. There is no need for a local riot, but for a serious event, then it serves to identify us. However, if you use bombs like Deepavali crackers then they lose impact”.

activists, this network functions as a training ground that inculcates the skills of leadership. Local activists are invariably presented with the opportunity to speak at meetings, and are frequently asked to handle local issues, problems and questions of recruitment. Palani Kumar, the Melavassel secretary, made his first speech at the flag-raising ceremony of a village where he had worked to establish the movement. Hesitant at first, he asked for an assessment of his performance and requested me to tape his speech so that he could listen to it later. As he grew in confidence he was granted further opportunities and platforms from which to speak. Through such processes of movement socialisation activists can rise through the ranks and serve as a bridge between the locality and the leadership.¹² Where such links were absent the strength of the movement declined, as the distant figures of authority were perceived to be divorced from local concerns and unaccountable to them. A Dalit leader it should be stressed, needs to be identified as one of the people. Speeches and ideologies are not in themselves sufficient, for fine words lack significance if leaders cannot relate to the people. The crucial factor here is *experience*. It is seen as vital for the leader themselves to have experienced what it means to be a Dalit, and what it means to suffer caste discrimination.¹³ This means that only a Dalit can be a Dalit leader. Furthermore, even if the leader has the requisite experience, they must still become one with the people. "Only by sleeping amongst Dalits and eating with them can we become close to them", as Ravichandran of Marutham Network expressed it. "But at the same time", he went on, "many tell of Dalit organisations who speak about Dalit liberation and stay in five star lodges" (Interview, 27/09/99). If you contrast this image with that painted of Thirumavallavan: "A people's leader who eats old Kanji (rice soaked in water) and raw chillies with his people", then one has an idea of the sort of leader who people can identify with (Anandan, SMP Colony, 23/3/99).¹⁴

POPULAR PEOPLE: THE LEADER AS ENTERTAINER

In many ways the leader comes to be seen as an entertainer. Movement leaders

¹¹ Mageli notes how it "made little sense to agitate for women's fundamental rights when their basic needs of livelihood were not being met" (1997: 10).

¹² Melucci's findings suggest that this is a widespread mode of movement 'socialisation' (1996: 342).

¹³ When asked whether the Dalit leaders would really make a difference and raise their voices in Parliament, Ravichandran of Marutham Network insisted that "they would, because they have suffered" (27/09/99). This sentiment underlines the importance of experience for Dalit leaders if they are to speak up on behalf of their people.

¹⁴ "Tamils disparage a life lived only for the self", as Mines asserts (1994: 189).

certainly have to compete with film stars and politicians for the attention of the people. In Melavassel, pre-school children could identify photographs of 'Thimallan Annan' even if they could not as yet pronounce his name. Such public recognition would usually be reserved to the most popular figures of the Tamil film industry, whose faces adorn billboards across the state. Movement occasions often have a festive air about them. The visit of the leader to a location is a cause for celebration – often marked by decorated stages, fairy lights and the consumption of alcohol. The speech of the leader is the highlight of such an event, and people want to see the person, as much as to listen to what is said.¹⁵ “Touching the leaders, speaking to them, seeing that they are ‘flesh and blood’”, as Cruces and De Rada observe, “all have an undeniable affective value which is not to be attained through the media” (1996: 118). Movement activists often express their gratitude for the leader’s visit by offering gifts.¹⁶ They are rewarded for their devotion by the public recognition they receive. “There is a particular intensity of following, a depth of devotion, felt for leaders perceived to be ‘heroes’”, as Dickey observes (1993a: 351). Such adulation is doubtless gratifying, but it carries with it a burden of responsibility. People expect results from their leaders. Not necessarily tangible ones, but at least an indication that the leader is doing his best for them, and that their trust is not in vain. The suggestion is not that Dalit leaders are film style superheroes, but whilst image is important the question of leadership cannot be decided on the basis of presentation alone.¹⁷ The heroic leader is recognised as such in contrast to the perceived corruption and venality of other figures of authority (cf. Dickey 1993: 351, Widlund 2000: 304). Their virtue lies in the fact that they have devoted themselves to work for the good of others, rather than themselves. The absolute faith reposed in the leader, however, means that the scope for abuse is huge. Movement members are often highly reflexive about this,

¹⁵ “Waiting for the leader’s appearance”, as Cruces and De Rada note, “generates a sense of suspense, and his exit induces a sense of closing. This kind of meeting can be deemed to be an authentic ritual event that aims to invest the leader with charisma” (1996: 109).

¹⁶ Kerzer refers to such gift giving as a ritual means by which “people communicate their pledge of clientage to a particular patron” (1988: 31)

¹⁷ The importance of presentation is a matter of discussion amongst movement members. A photograph in the media, for example, depicted Thirumavallavan, Moopanar, and Dr. Krishnasamy seated alongside each other. The obvious point of interest was that the two major Dalit leaders in Tamilnadu were sharing a platform for the first time, was of secondary interest to my friends in the LPs. They were more interested in the fact that Krishnasamy had his trainer clad feet stuck out across the platform, whereas Annan (referring to Thirumavallavan in this context) was so neat and decorous. I have no doubt that members of the PT could have given another gloss to the picture. What it highlights is the difference in style between the two leaders. See also Fearon (1999), who notes that impressions of how the candidate speaks, dresses, expresses and conducts themselves influence peoples choice of leader.

and examples of 'good and bad leadership' feature prominently in their discussions (cf. Fearon 1999: 59).

ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION: REFLECTING MEMBER'S INTERESTS

It should be no surprise that those seen as good leaders conform most closely to the conditions outlined above. They are accessible, in touch with the people and good speakers. The increase in Dalit assertion, however, has also fostered a desire for radical leaders. The 'softly-softly' approach of the Dalit Elder, Vai Balasundaram of the Ambedkar People's Movement (API), therefore, has led to an exodus of youth. The API was the first major Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu, and at its height in the late 1970's 'Vai Ba' was seen as *the* Dalit leader. "You had to book two or three years in advance if you wanted a meeting", as Rajagopalan, a movement activist put it (API & DLM activist. Interview, 11/10/99). At the time Balasundaram helped to create Dalit awareness by combating untouchability, and caught the political imagination by resigning from his post as DMK mayor of Chennai to fight for the cause. In the 1970's the API walked down caste-Hindu streets wearing shoes and smashed up shops that persisted in following the two-glass system. Then they were a radical movement that raised the consciousness of rural Dalits and made the abstract legal prohibitions on caste discrimination more meaningful than before. Despite this, 'Vai Ba' was never disassociated from party politics – his approach was often legalistic and though bold for the time has lost resonance now. He lost the backing of Rajagopalan when he unilaterally announced his electoral support for Rajiv Gandhi without proper consultation. As we have seen, the early emphasis on social inclusion has been superseded by a demand for political rights and a share of power. Today the speeches of radical leaders are taped and replayed by members who wish to return a hit for a hit rather than resort to the law. As expectations have risen, the demands placed on Dalit leaders have changed and those leaders who have not shifted with the times are being left behind.

CASTE OR CAUSE

The significance accorded to representing member's interests and issues, however, frequently translates into the demand that a leader should be from the particular caste that forms the bulk of a movement. There has been a trend towards caste-based mobilisation (cf. Duncan 1999: 36). By emphasising the rights and well being of any

one caste community the leaders run the danger of severing attachment to an emerging Dalit consciousness and fostering inter caste rivalries or jealousy between members of the Scheduled Caste community. Organising on the basis of caste, as the leader of the Dalit Liberation Movement frankly admitted, is a much easier proposition than the attempt to mobilise disparate individuals against caste *per se*.¹⁸ The strong internal solidarity of a caste is cemented by proximity within a locality, endogamous marriage practices and the rhetoric of blood relationship. Although the leaders of particularistic movements invariably assert their commitment to Dalit rights in general, the immediate objective is to increase the social mobility and cohesion of their own community. Dr Krishnasamy, of Puthiya Tamilagam, emphasised that the musical notes of diverse instruments may merge to form a symphony, and that the many different caste movements could likewise work in harmony on *Dalit* issues (Speech 01/12/99). More often, the propensity to organise on caste lines has only hampered the cause of Dalit liberation by creating rifts between the Scheduled Castes. Putnam asserts that a “key indicator of civic sociability must be the vibrancy of associational life” (1993: 91), but particular identities are constructed in opposition to an ‘other’ who may be a Dalit caste, let alone a higher-caste community. Mageli (1997: 61) notes the importance of loyalty in Indian organisational behaviour, and the difficulties in bridging the gap between different groups. Social capital, in other words, is not evenly distributed through society, rather it is “context-dependent” (Chandhoke 2001: 15). Ultimately, therefore, particularistic movements increase the affinity that members feel towards a leader, rather than towards the cause. This mode of organisation also lends weight to the State’s depiction of Dalit movements as casteist institutions that need to be suppressed.

V: THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP DECISION MAKING

The role of movement leadership, according to Melucci, is to define objectives, facilitate action, and maintain cohesion (1996: 339-40). The “fulcrum for leadership action”, he insists, “is the *decision*, that is the capacity to choose between alternatives

¹⁸ Daniel Gnanasekaran spoke of getting rid of the Dalit label. “It is the need of the hour”, he said. “That is the only way to go. I am being forced to become a caste movement. Look Tambi, all movements and parties are organising along caste lines – that is the way it is, that is the sign of these times. It is easy and unproblematic to organise on the basis of caste, but very difficult to call yourself a Dalit” (12/10/99). See Anandan (Hindu 24/07/2001) for a critique of “anti-caste” movements.

and reduce uncertainties” (1996: 340). By reifying the role of the leader, however, social movement theorists can end up downplaying the relationship between leaders and activists. As Boholm, observes, the leader “receives political support because he (sic) skilfully draws on a repertoire of current or latent idioms and symbols” (1996: 163). Becoming a leader, therefore, requires the internalisation of group values and norms. Whilst the leadership may articulate the aims and objectives of a movement, in other words, these objectives have to be decided upon in complex, and often contentious, processes of negotiation. The objectives of a leader cannot, as the Liberation Panthers realised, be imposed upon an unwilling constituency. Although the leadership was convinced of the need to boycott the elections, for example, Dalits continued to turn out in large numbers to exercise their franchise. This did not mean that the decision to contest the polls in 1999 was a formality, since many of the movement activists had come to perceive themselves as revolutionary actors, and they were unwilling to enter the institutions that they had hitherto disdained.¹⁹ The leaders of any movement, thus, are constrained by the views of their members, and affected by the position of the population at large. Realising that the election boycott lacked popular appeal convinced the DPI to alter their strategy. The TDLM’s innovative attempt to create a non-hierarchical and participatory structure has also failed to catch on thus far. In many ways the relationship between the leadership committee of the TDLM and the peripheral members of the movement continues to resemble that of other movements.

The mode of organisation, the posters and speeches combine to reinforce the centrality of the leader within a movement. This person-centred mode of organisation is arguably a prominent characteristic of Indian society.²⁰ The public image of a person, as we have seen, is fostered in several ways. Price observes that “superior status and power ... have divine attributes in popular Hinduism” (1989: 571). There is a tendency, therefore, to assign leaders the status of heroes or Gods. The corollary of this position is that members revere and adore leaders rather than seeing them as equals (cf. Chandhoke 1999). This results in a sense of dependency upon, and

¹⁹ One activist at a protest meeting in Vadipatti for example, insisted that sitting by the road and speaking was a waste of time. “I came here to sit in the road and block traffic” he insisted. Having asserted the corruption and pointlessness of institutional politics for so long, it was not easy to convince people of the need to contest the elections.

absolute trust in, the leaders. The weddings of movement members, for example, are seen as incomplete unless they are 'blessed' by the leader, and leaders were frequently asked to name babies. Leaders are often seen as beyond reproach. The Dalits of Allallaberi in Madurai District were turned into refugees after their rejection of the demeaning roles that they were hereditarily forced to perform. The DLM leader worked tirelessly on their behalf and succeeded in relocating them to another location. "He had blood on his feet from walking here and there on our behalf", as one of the residents put it. Although he had not responded to their requests and pleas for some years now, and they were facing problems in their current location, they remained loyal to their 'saviour'.²¹ "We owe it to [Danny] Annan, he did so much to help us, we are his followers", as Moses insisted (Interview 16/02/99). Charity and gift giving by powerful benefactors carry deep-rooted cultural significance, and the ties between leader and follower are often cemented by acts of patronage and favours (Dickey 1993: 352, Mines 1994: 42, de Wit 1996: 265, Subramanian 1999: 287). The pre-eminence of the leader is thus tempered by the cultural expectations of altruism. Whilst Dalit leaders are not usually in a position to distribute patronage, indeed I only ever saw Thirumavalavan *receiving* gifts, they must achieve a reputation for commitment, for looking after their members, and for getting things done. Leaders, as Brass observes, are "perceived to have a duty of care for the material interests of followers" (1990: 96).

THE MEMBERS COME FIRST: RECIPROCITY AND SELF-EFFACEMENT

The adulatory loyalty of activists demands a degree of reciprocity. Movement members are aware of imperfection amongst leaders, and are conscious of the problems of autocratic control. The most cited failing of leadership is a lack of accountability. Rajagopalan, as we have seen, left the AMI because the leader unilaterally announced that the movement would be supporting Congress in 1991. In the 1999 election members of the Dalit Liberation Movement (DLM) were outraged by their leaders' decision to support the ruling DMK-BJP combine in the district of Karur, whilst backing the Dalit and Minority based TMC front elsewhere. The reasons

²⁰ On leadership see Rudolphs (1967), Price (1989), Kohli (1990), Dickey (1993, 1993a), Mines (1994), Mageli (1997). Especially Price, Dickey (1993a) and Mines.

²¹ This depth of loyalty is not confined to Dalit movements but is an endemic feature of political affiliation in India. When the AIADMK supremo, Jayalalitha, was cleared of a conspiracy to defraud in

that I was provided, when I interviewed the leader shortly thereafter, had not been conveyed to the members of his movement. The TDLM split off from the DLM, citing this leader's disapproval of local initiatives. "This movement is our asset. The liberty of the people is our future," Subramaniam of the TDLM explained. "So for the leader to say, 'this is my movement, if you like it stay, otherwise get out', is most unjust" (Conversation, 11/10/99). The example may be specific, but the sentiment expressed is common. The lack of participation in decision making means that the only way such organisations can be democratic is through a stress upon accountability (Parry & Moran 1994: 5). This desire for accountability may explain one of the paradoxes involved in being a good leader. On the one hand they *are* pivotal to movement organisation, on the other 'good' leaders retain a sense that the movement is most important. Speeches frequently assert that people should not struggle for the leader per se, but for the cause that they espouse. Movement stability is also a recurrent theme in which it is stressed that the leader could be jailed or lose their life but the movement would live on. The contrast between this self-effacement on the one hand, and the deification of the leader on the other is, perhaps, less of a paradox when it is understood in terms of the cultural expectations and norms of leadership (cf.: Dickey 1993: 351, Mines 1994: 189). The leader is, in effect, saying that they are not involved for their own self-interest, but for the greater good.

The emphasis on the movement is a reaffirmation of the issues that are being fought for, and a reassertion of the altruism of the leader. It is also a confirmation of the exchange envisioned in movement membership and a public acknowledgement of the dedication of the members. "We are behind Thirumavallavan Annan, and he is behind us" as Selvi, a young Dalit woman living on the pavement in the heart of Madurai, put it. Her community has no proper houses, no recognised jobs, and no education. They have, however, established a wing of the Liberation Panthers in the shrine where they congregate, and have painted the walls with the symbols of their movement. They insist that the high profile and radical rhetoric of the DPI has reduced the incidence of police harassment, and given them a sense of security (Selvi, Jansi Rani Complex 22/03/99). It is such support that elevates the leader to a position of authority, and it is to acknowledge and retain such support that the rhetoric of self-effacement has arisen.

the colour TV case (Hindu: June 1999), for example, the party supporters celebrated with a fervour that was undimmed by the conviction of several other senior party members.

This rhetoric is also functional for the everyday management of the movement. Too exclusive a focus upon the central leader, as we have seen, results in an inability to act in their absence. The prevalence of local conflicts renders such inertia fatal to the efficient operation of a movement. No matter how much the presence of the leader increases crowds or is demanded, they cannot be everywhere at once. "The leader", therefore, "must facilitate the division and articulation of tasks and make the best possible use of the different talents available to the movement"(Melucci 1996: 339).

VI: BRIDGING THE GAP: THE LEADER AND THE LOCALITY

SECONDARY LEADERS

Melucci's emphasis on the role of the leader here is somewhat contradictory given his assertion that "leaders of movements cannot rely on an institutional structure" (1996: 334). Social movements are said to be distinguished from party structures by not having a clearly defined hierarchy of command. A structure of secondary leadership, is required for even the most centralised movements, however, to bridge the gap between the movement and the leader. District and local secretaries are often installed to manage the local organisation on a semi-autonomous basis. Lack of office management, communications, transport facilities, infrastructure and funds, as Thirumavallavan observes, preclude Dalit leaders from being instantaneously in touch, or in control, of a given situation (Interview, 3rd November 1999).²² Although this would appear to preclude the emergence of a highly centralised leadership, the leader is very much a presence, even when absent. The houses of activists and local branch 'offices' are incomplete without the image of the leader. Tapes of the leader's speeches are also frequently 'broadcast'. The reverse is also the case, in that some leaders take a keen interest in the local running of a movement even in their absence. One of the reasons for the T/DLM split was that the absent leader complained that they were not referring their decisions to him. This points to a tension between local and regional leadership. Ideally the local cadre should have a level of autonomy that enables them to respond to issues of immediate concern, but local leaders were frequently dependent on the leader, both as a guiding figure and as an authority whose word would be acceptable to all. Dilemmas, such as the wording for a poster of protest, were often referred to the leader.

²² The Liberation Panthers (DPI), according to Thirumavallavan, were built up with the aid of a single pager.

It is clear that local and everyday aspects of the movement must continue in the absence of the leader and most movements have at least attempted to institute structures of secondary leadership. Some movements have established a number of accepted secondary leaders. The DPI boasts that Thirumavalavan need not visit the northern districts of the state, since the movement's general secretary is so well established there. The voluntary nature of activism and the lack of resources, however, have tended to render these hierarchies fluid and unpredictable. Local activists frequently have to act on their own initiative and they do not always act in accordance with the wishes of the leader. The lack of infrastructure often impinged upon the smooth running of the movement. On several occasions the main orator of the Liberation Panthers was unable to attend meetings even though his name had been printed on the notice, because he had not been informed in advance or he lacked the necessary bus fare (Personal Communication). "Firebrand Murugan", so termed due to the fiery character of his oratory, worked as a construction labourer when not involved in movement work. On several occasions his speeches displayed a lack of knowledge about the intentions of the leadership.²³ The leader's ability to marshal the talent at his/her disposal may be crucial, therefore, but it is influenced by factors such as funding, communications infrastructure, and the political situation. Talented crews of folk artists were available, for example, and would have been invaluable in spreading the message of the organisation to a largely illiterate population. The prevalence of atrocities and caste conflicts however, rendered the movements predominantly reactive during my stay in 1999. Instead it was the NGO groups, which have better resources, that organised Dalit art festivals and cultural programmes.

TALKING TO THE ENEMY: THE LEADER AND POLITICAL NEGOTIATION

The constraints imposed upon movement organisation mean that it is incumbent upon the leadership to maximise the availability of resources by interacting with other groups or parties (Lipsky 1970: 168). Regardless of the movement's internal structure, the prominent public image of the leader necessitates their presence in all negotiations with other bodies. Members of the secondary leadership may become

²³ In the run up to the election Firebrand Murugan's lack of information was especially noticeable. For several speeches before the DPI aligned with the Third Front he castigated the DMK, AIADMK & the

conspicuous enough to negotiate with other institutions on a local level, but the significance of the leader remains undiminished because neither the wider society nor the media reflect the prominence that secondary figures may receive within the movement. It is the leader, therefore, (or the leadership committee) that has to assess which organisations are acceptable as allies and what sort of relationship to enter into with them. Though, as we have seen, the leaders are not able to act in isolation, since they must always bear in mind the reactions of the activists. When Thirumavalavan went to meet the leader of the AIADMK shortly before the 1999 elections, for example, the press reported that he had entered into an alliance with the party. Over time the leader could have persuaded the activists of the wisdom of this alliance, but to move straight from a radical boycott of the electoral process to an alliance with a corrupt and autocratic party was unacceptable to the members. Whether the press was mistaken or not, the furore that erupted within the movement caused DPI leaders to issue swift disclaimers. For months thereafter they denied the reports in movement meetings. The leaders may be in the best position to assess the options open to the movement, because they are frequently in possession of information that is not available to the members. But to act upon this, without first engaging in a process of negotiation within the movement leads to disaffection amongst the ranks. At stake for members of the movement are questions of identity and self-image. DPI activists, as we have seen, resented the transition to electoral participation because this was seen as compromising the objectives of social and political change for short-term expediency.

The 'decision', thus, is evidently the pivotal role of leadership. The brevity of the term, however, serves to conceal the complexity of the processes involved. Extensive consultations with movement members and the leaders of other institutions are required before any major decision can be made. In its simplest manifestation, the leader may be called upon to clarify the wording of a document or poster and settle local differences. For more deep-rooted alterations, however, the leader's position will not remain unquestioned and the task then is to convince the membership. Far from the original definition of charismatic leadership, therefore, Dalit leaders are not perceived to be divinely inspired or infallible. Where the leader fails to sell a decision

TMC. When he later turned round and supported 'Moopanar Aiyah', therefore, he had some explaining to do.

to the activists a schism in the movement may, as the DLM discovered, result. The reduction of uncertainty, therefore, must be negotiated rather than dictated. Once a decision has been made it must be explained, elaborated upon and presented to the constituents. If it is unclear how a movement benefits from a particular decision the immediate question becomes; what is in it for the leader? 'Suitcase politics' is the contemptuous phrase by which people in India denote unprincipled alliances in which money is believed to have changed hands. Such charges are difficult either to validate or disprove and so the onus falls on the leaders to account for their actions. It was to escape such charges of mendicancy that the Dalit movements refused to extend unconditional support to the TMC Front in the 1999 elections. Instead they insisted that any political settlement must be premised upon the Dalit groups experiencing a 'share of power'. The alteration in strategy was significant enough for the Dalit movements to adopt a proactive approach to convince their members of the propriety of the alliance. 'Election Cassettes' of songs and speeches were produced and widely distributed, countless speeches were made, and innumerable villages visited. Accusations of venality, as Mines (1994: 42) notes, are common, and DPI activists certainly felt an initial sense of betrayal. Unless decisions are explained for the benefit of the members, it is clear, they can foster a sense of compromise that weakens the morale of the activists.

VII: ROTTEN APPLES: LEADERS GONE ASTRAY

BETRAYAL

Betrayal need not result from external influences, but may occur within a movement itself. The loyalty reposed in the leader means that the members always place themselves in danger of misrepresentation or abuse. The rhetoric of self-effacement affirms the leader's commitment to his people and to the wider cause, but there is always the danger that they will become corrupt, or that they will abandon an issue. Taking money to support an established political party was frequently alleged, and always condemned. It was the crime that other leaders committed. Where movement leaders did secure political alliances without consultation, as we have seen, this led to disaffection and defections. There were also, however, cases of betrayal on a more basic level. In a Collector's office, for example, when the leaders of a movement (which will remain anonymous) sought the release of forty-five members who had been arrested at a demonstration, they were offered a choice: "Hand yourselves over

for arrest and we will release the others.” The leader in question opted to remain at liberty and fight for the release of the members from without the prison walls. One of his regional facilitators, however, pointed out that rank and file members were more likely to receive harsh treatment than the leadership. When the decision stood, the facilitator asserted, “I lost all faith in the leader of the movement”. A similar tale was recounted in which the leader of a movement accepted some money to fight a court case. A member of his movement had been defrauded of several thousand rupees by a higher caste person. Having taken out a case to get the money returned, the leader allegedly capitulated to lawyers and agreed to settle out of court. The activist, thus, had lost not only the initial sum of money, but also the cash that he put up to fight the case. The leaders in question have not had the opportunity to respond to the allegations and the point here is not to castigate certain movements and endorse others. What these examples highlight is the position of inferiority from which movement members operate. Those let down by their chosen leader can and do switch allegiances to another, but the relationship between the two is so uneven that there is very often no other means of redress.²⁴

Lack of accountability and aloofness from the people are the leadership failings that were most often cited. There are, however, more patent examples of ‘bad leadership’. Manakadavu, a rural village in South West Tamilnadu, was beset by caste clashes after Dalits in the village challenged the continuing practice of untouchability there. This was most obvious in the persistence of the two-glass system. Dalit leaders rallied to the cause of the protestors in the village, and it was documented in various newspapers and magazines. Six months on from the initial event, however, I visited Manakadavu and found that the solidarity suggested in the early reports was lacking. In the initial enthusiasm of challenging the caste structures in their location the Dalits were united. At the time of my visit, however, they were disheartened. Various Dalit movements had promised to help in the struggle, but the leaders of the DLM, the PT, and the Tamilaga Arundadhiar Youth Front (TAYF) had all abandoned the village due to disputes between themselves (Interview with villagers 18/10/99). Dr. Krishnasamy of the PT defended himself against this charge, declaring that his movement could not

²⁴ It is not my intention, in this thesis, to make judgements as to which movements were ‘better’ than others, which leaders were corrupt, and which activists were ‘most’ committed. I have included these

intervene where others had entered the fray already. He also stressed that the Chakkiliyar people must organise amongst themselves rather than depend upon the muscle of movements built elsewhere (Speech 01/12/99). The DLM and TAYF are primarily drawn from this caste, but they fell out with each other rather than uniting on behalf of the villagers. The result not only highlighted divisions in the Dalit community, but also left the villagers of Manakadavu without organisational support at the time when they were most in need of it. The betrayal of this community is another indication of petty jealousy and concerns about territory serving to deny justice to the Dalit people rather than enable it.

ARTICULATING ALTERNATIVES

Having experienced such abuse of trust the TDLM attempted to establish a more participatory and accountable organisational structure. As we have seen, the democratising impulse that prompted this leadership experiment has yet to filter down to the grassroots. The leadership committee of the TDLM continues to replicate the relationship between the leaders and the members (particularly women) that the other movements display. It will be interesting in the future to assess whether this experiment can withstand the gradual expansion of the movement, and the need for greater efficiency in movement organisation and decision making. The participatory emphasis of the movement was evident in the Annual General Body meeting in October, as were its failings. Although the group sat around in a circle on the floor, and everyone was invited to contribute, it was apparent that some were more equal than others. Only one of the 25 people present was a woman, and she was a supplicant rather than an activist. The participatory emphasis of the movement has yet to be extended to the institution of a Women's Wing and the experiment in participatory leadership can hardly be said to be complete. There is, however, an alternative mode of organisation that aspires to prefigure a more egalitarian society. This is most evident in the women's organisations that campaign on the Dalit issue. In the aftermath of the violence in Chidambaram constituency, the Women's Struggle Committee organised several protest meetings. Their approach is similar to that of the male equivalent, but without the overwhelming focus upon one central individual. This is not to say that there are not prominent leaders in the women's movements, or

examples of malpractice to highlight the problems associated with over centralisation, and the difficulties of activism, rather than to discredit any one movement.

that they are not as forceful and articulate as their male counterparts, but they do have a different approach. The leader's speeches are usually short and specific, and are part of the process rather than the climax. Gabrielle Dietrich, who is both a leader of the Women's Rights Movement (*Penurimai Iyakkam*) in Madurai, and an academic, explained that this approach corresponds to ideological beliefs about equality and participation. She also stressed, however, that none of the women's leaders were interested in being "this big figure" (Discussion, 27/10/99).

Women's organisations such as the PI, as Mageli notes, are "less elitist than male associations because they allowed for more democratic ways of interaction and decision-making than is common in Indian political practice" (1997: 12). In practice, however, many women's groups retained hierarchical structures. In addition, women have tended to mirror the political segmentation of the Dalit community, often forming separate 'women's wings' (*makila ani*) rather than establishing independent movements. In the relationship between the male and female wings of a movement, the women are seen as peripheral to the 'movement proper'. Many of the women's leaders, as Dietrich notes, face sexist discrimination at home as well as being disregarded by the movement. The patriarchal division of household labour, as discussed in the previous chapter, renders it extremely difficult for women who have to do the cooking and look after the kids to become a movement activist (Conversation 27/10/99). Many of the women's leaders are highly skilled and inspirational. One such figure is Pandiammal, the DPI secretary in Keerathurai, but as seen in chapter six, her contribution was not always recognised by the male leaders.²⁵ The rhetoric of women's liberation is ever present, but it is all too often belied in practice. Stronger and more active women's movements could make a significant impact on the Dalit struggle by raising the issue of leadership and the patriarchal nature of most movements. In this sense they could be crucial to the democratisation of the Dalit struggle.

²⁵ Adline, a leader of the PI recollected an instance in which she had been to see Thirumavalavan to discuss the possibility of increased collaboration between the two movements. When asked for a point of contact, Thirumavalavan mentioned a higher caste lawyer who was active for the movement, overlooking Pandiammal who was present at the time (Interview with Adline 01/10/99).

STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

The 'contingency' and the 'new leadership' approaches represent two contemporary attempts to assess the importance of leadership. The former emphasises the importance of the situation from which a leader emerges, and the latter asserts the need for a visionary leadership (which includes charismatic leadership) (Bryman 1992). The significance of the contingency approach has been referred to above. The new leadership stress on the need for vision again, highlights a necessary but by no means determining aspect of leadership in any liberation struggle. Whilst personal ability, behaviour, adjustment to a situation and vision, are undeniably important in choosing a leader (Fearon 1999: 59), they do not seem to explain the form of leadership which is most prevalent in the social movements under question. In explaining the structural position of the leaders, rather than their individual merit, an analysis of the specific political culture from which they emerge has proved to be more fruitful to understanding contemporary Dalit movements. According to this perspective, Dalit movements may be opposed to the social *system* that oppresses them, but they remain entangled in the *structure* of that society. These structures are hierarchical, male-dominated, and revolve around the idolised individuality of 'Big Men'. The examples of the TDLM and the Women's movements provide alternative models that have attempted to create a more egalitarian conception of leadership.

If it is true that "a leader attracts a following by the benefits that he provides" (Mines 1994: 57), then the preponderance of leader centred organisations is perhaps inevitable. A participatory emphasis is the antithesis of the patron-client links that are predicated upon the existence of inequality. A number of factors conspire to perpetuate the existence of 'big men': Firstly, the persistence of marked inequalities in India. Secondly; the relative absence of firm, impersonal guarantees of security, position and livelihood, and finally; the inability of kinship to serve as an effective means of advancement (for the Dalits in particular) (Scott 1977: 132). The power asymmetry upon which such relationships are based precludes their swift dissolution, and inhibits the formation of autonomous and participatory organisations. A chronic disability of Dalit movements is a lack of resources which has hindered the attempt to escape the traditional caste based ties of dependency and acquire a sense of supra-local issue oriented politics. It is arguable that leader-centred organisations have been able to give Dalits a voice and thus speeded up this process. The emergence of 'big

men' from *within* the community has allowed Dalits to erode the local structures of power. In reaction to this process the locally dominant castes have resorted to what Hall (1977) terms "repressive clientelism". Threats, violence, rape and murder, have marked a coercive response to increasing Dalit agency. Given the precarious nature of the situation, the prevalence of leader-focussed groups should not be surprising (Inglehart 1999: 242). Dyadic relationships of this nature, as Powell (1977: 147) insists, are a form of 'anxiety reduction behaviour'.

VIII: CONCLUSION: THE DEMOCRATIC IMPERATIVE

Dalit movements in Tamil Nadu are now entering the political process and questioning the validity of Indian democracy. The experience of the Dalit contestants in the 1999 elections has prompted a critique of democratic practice. Obviously, making elections more meaningful and fair requires structural changes. If the Dalit movements are not to compromise the principles and ideals, that caused them to enter the political process, they must attempt to reform the institutions that they have now joined. For such reforms to carry any weight, however, these critiques will have to be reflected in the democratisation of the movements themselves. These themes are addressed in the following section on the 1999 Lok Sabha Elections. The centrality and power of the leaders came under particular scrutiny during the transition to conventional politics. Institutionalisation is said to result in the creation of movement regulations and a clear hierarchy of command. This is partly because contesting elections requires a different mode of operation and a different relationship with the people. The following chapter will focus on the experience of the Liberation Panthers in 1999 in order to highlight the issues involved. As Dalit struggles transcend their social origins and extend into the political arena they have to apply their critique of the political process to their own organisations. It is vital, therefore, for the Dalit movements to confront the question of internal democracy and implement democratic decision making and dispute solving procedures within their own ranks. If the Dalit movements metamorphose into corrupt, power seeking and opportunist political parties, then the disaffection of the people could find a more violent outlet. Dalit movements are an integral part of the country's political environment and from that perspective democratisation is imperative to reform both themselves and the society at large. Contemporary Dalit leaders in Tamil Nadu are inspiring, often self-less and dedicated, and committed to the vision of a more egalitarian society. The crowds that

they mobilise into action, and the numbers of people whose grievances they articulate, are a testimony to their work. The instances of betrayal and corruption, the sidelining of 'women's issues', and the dependence upon the central leader, however, highlight the failings of over-reliance upon a central figure. "There can not be a democracy without a revolution", as Ungo paraphrased Rosa Luxemburg as saying, "neither can there be a revolution without democracy" (in Castañeda 1993: 377).

SECTION FOUR:
Dalit Movements and the Political Process

*In Kingly times
My Great Grandad
Worked as a herald
Under the big landlords
My Grandfather
Was a bonded Labourer
In the Politician's age
My father
Was a Daily labourer
In Social-Democratic India
I still do not have work today
The right and preference to work
For Harijans
Is a lot of hot air
All false canvassing
"Harijans"
Are not a poor category
Landlords and
Rich People are in it
Upper Class Agents who
Get their hands on government benefits
Meet many victories
In the name of reservations.
Liberty is lost
I, who justly oppose
Politicians who live on caste
Say with courage
Yes!
I am a Dalit*

(K. Subbaiah, Pondicheri. In *Dalit Mulukkam* Dec. 1998. Trans. Self)

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE MOVE TO POLITICS: The Institutional Self-transformation of the Liberation Panthers

I: INTRODUCTION

INSTITUTIONAL SELF-TRANSFORMATION

In 1999, the Liberation Panthers abandoned their boycott of democratic procedures and decided to contest the elections. In this transition they followed the development trajectory of all the main contenders in Tamil politics who have moved from social movement activity into party politics. The prior transformations of the Dravidian parties, the Paatali Makkal Katchi and Puthiya Tamilagam have established what Offe (1990: 250) terms 'an institutional learning process'. His contention is that social movements are transitory expressions of dissatisfaction with the limitations of 'normal politics' and demands for the inclusion of marginal groups into the mainstream. Extrapolating trends from his analysis of the Green party in West Germany, Offe delineates a tentative "stage model of the institutional dilemmas, ambiguities and crises that are typically encountered by these new movements" (1990: 235). In the process of institutionalisation, according to this model, movements generally go through three general stages. The 'take-off' phase of movement politics is radical and idealist. The rhetoric employed is absolute, permitting of no compromise, and change is expected to be imminent. This phase is also the high-point of movement mobilisation as people are caught up in the initial enthusiasm. This involvement is hard to sustain, however, and lack of achievement or partial concessions by the state cause membership to decline and participation to dwindle. The movement goes through a period of 'stagnation', therefore, during which it is forced to restructure itself, become more organised and seek resources with which to continue the struggle. At this juncture the opportunities afforded by alliances with established parties render a gradual transformation to the institutional modes of 'normal politics' highly attractive, if not imperative. The phase of institutionalisation marks the culmination of movement activity and the initiation of political negotiation. Whilst Offe's model offers useful insights into the macro processes of institutionalisation, the transition on the ground is obviously too complex to be captured by a general model. In what follows I shall outline the DPI's transition from movement to party, which will point to the applicability of Offe's findings as well as highlighting the specificity of the Dalit movements.

This section perhaps requires justification. Electoral analysis usually focuses on results, which are said to reflect the popular will. Showing that a party gained a large percentage of the votes in a given election is crucial to leaders, who need to stress the legitimacy and popularity of their programmes. In India such analysis is frequently broken down to reveal the religious or caste composition of the results. There is an assumption that social groups constitute 'vote banks' that enter an election with the interests of their immediate group at heart. This tendency is apparent in Tamil Nadu where the two most politically organised castes, the Vanniyars in the North and the Thevars in the South, are said to determine the outcome in many constituencies. Candidates are often chosen on the basis of caste, and voters are assumed to favour their own caste people. The Dalits are somewhat excluded from these calculations as they are commonly presented as 'disunited' and 'easily bought off', but there is a legal requirement to field Dalit candidates in certain constituencies. In what follows, I do not present an analysis of figures and statistics to display changes in Dalit voting patterns. This section, rather, will focus on the cultural understandings that underpin democracy. By drawing on interviews, observations and speeches, these two chapters argue that the results do not tell the whole story. Before we assess the elections, however, we need to disentangle the web of processes, events and decisions that led the Liberation Panthers to abandon their boycott of the electoral process. At the heart of this move was a critique of contemporary politics and a rejection of the hegemony of the two Dravidian parties. Understanding this process of transition, and the way that it was articulated, is vital if we are to grasp the significance of the 1999 elections. In these chapters I focus on the Liberation Panthers, but the arguments have a wider relevance. They are not the only, or even the first, Dalit movement to stand for election. The election of Dr. Krishnasamy to the Legislative Assembly in 1996, on behalf of the Puthiya Tamilagam Party, may be pointed to as a precedent. I shall argue, however, that the events leading up to the elections in 1999 marked a significant turning point in Tamil politics.

II: IDENTITY POLITICS

CONSTRUCTED COLLECTIVITIES

Social Movement theorists have recently attempted a synthesis of existing approaches to the study of group action. The move away from a dichotomy between 'cultural' and

‘structural’ approaches is necessary if we are to fully grasp the complex processes of movement formation and operation. This move enables us to examine the strategies adopted by social movements as more than just opportunist reactions to the opening or closing of the Political Opportunity Structure. It would, however, be absurd to present strategic decisions as those of completely free-willed individuals acting independently of the social structure. Few scholars have focused on the choice of tactics or strategy, but these are rarely decisions about which protestors are indifferent. *Actions* express the moral visions and political identities of protestors as well as ideologies (Benford & Hunt 1995: 95, Fine 1995: 130, Jasper 1997: 237). Movement strategies, in other words, help to define identity. In speaking of identity here, we can follow Della Porta and Diani in defining it as “the process by which social actors recognise themselves – and are recognised by other actors – as part of broader groupings” (1999: 85). It is on this basis that actors achieve a sense of who they are, and what they stand for. Identities, thus, are “sources of meaning for the actors themselves” (Castells 1997: 7). Whilst personal identities are constructed to give meaning to an individual’s own experiences and development, “collective identity consists of perceptions of group distinctiveness, boundaries and interests” (Jasper 1997: 86). In South India group identity has often been privileged above that of the individual, and the good of the whole (or at least a part of it) has been prioritised over self-interest. This is perhaps most obvious in the institutions for marriage, where arranged matches, often within the extended family, are preferred to individual choice on the basis of love and attachment.

The bounds of caste now extend beyond the immediate locality, however, and, as with other communities, they are to a large extent ‘imagined’. That is, they involve an image of unity with ‘fellow-members’ whom individuals will never meet, see or hear about (Anderson 1983). Movement identity may be distinguished from that of an ascribed group because it is only constructed, activated and sustained through interaction (Foweraker 1995: 4, Taylor and Whittier 1995: 172, Jasper 1997: 86). Movement identity, thus, is critical in explaining how structural inequality is transformed into an active desire for social change. The process of identity formation, according to Melucci, “involves cognitive definitions concerning the ends, means, and field of action” (1995: 44). Action strategies are crucial to group cohesion, therefore, and they can either reinforce or challenge these patterns of identity. The Liberation

Panthers whom I encountered early in 1999 saw themselves as ‘radical actors’ who were not bought off by the ‘grand election carnivals’ that serve to provide the political institutions with legitimacy. They boasted of the ‘radical election boycott’, which they had been conducting for over ten years. To distinguish their actions from the apathy of others, the DPI had a policy of spoiling ballot papers. In the 1991 elections they wrote “none of you are honest, so none will have our votes” on their ballot slips, before casting their ‘vote’. A similar message was supposedly substituted for each successive election, but it is difficult to determine the efficacy of this policy. The rejection of political democracy mirrored disillusionment with the legal means of protest. Many members expressed their preference for road-blocks, rail-blocks and retaliation. Of many slogans expressing their willingness to leave the path of legal protest the most popular was the threat that they would return a blow for a blow. They spoke of being prepared to break the law if necessary and of having *aruvals* (sickles) in every house. When they recalled past protests, or how they would commandeer train carriages to go up to meetings in Madras, it was obvious that they had a sense of empowerment, of the power of protest (Benford & Hunt 1995: 95, Jasper 1997: 220). Who they were was articulated in what they did, and their speeches and interviews are replete with references to themselves as a *restrained force* of revolutionary capacity that could, and would, explode if certain changes were not effected. By adopting the methods of democratic contest, therefore, the Liberation Panthers were not merely changing their procedure but were altering the very identity of the movement.

The notion that a movement encompasses a range of members who differ in terms of commitment and radicalism is an established one (Slater 1985: 6, Offe 1990: 242, Krishna 1996: 252). A distinction between radicals and moderates was apparent in the DPI, and never more so than when they were debating whether to abandon their boycott of the election. I have spoken elsewhere of the centrality and authority of movement leaders in Tamil Nadu, but never was Thirumavalavan’s leadership challenged so much as in this decision. The 72 member Committee of the DPI leadership met several times and local members entered into heated debates on the issue. “The identity of a protestor”, as Jasper puts it, “may be that of someone who attends rallies and marches, or somebody who sabotages corporate labs. ... These are quite distinct identities, and there is no reason to think that it is easy to switch from one to another” (1997: 246). One inebriated DPI member interrupted the speakers at a

rally in Vadipatti saying “I didn’t come here to listen to you spouting off, I came here to block the road!!” Ultimately the democrats won the argument and the DPI decided to abandon its boycott of the elections, yet the stance they adopted was not a ringing endorsement of democracy. It was presented as a change in procedure not policy; a strategic decision that could be reversed at any point. “It is to prevent our direct enemies from harvesting our votes that we have taken the practical decision to cast our votes”, Thirumavalavan told members at a wedding reception. “This is a procedural step (*nadumurai*)”, he assured them, “not a change in policy (*kortpaadu*), it is a tactic (*uthi*)” (16/06/99 Madurai). In the months leading up to the elections, Thirumavalavan embarked on a tour of movement branches throughout the state explaining the change in policy and urging members to co-operate. This campaign of information implicitly recognised that there was more at stake than a mere procedural alteration. The existence of a collective actor is usually ‘taken for granted’ but it is, in fact, “the product of highly differentiated social processes, action orientations, elements of structure, and motivation” (Melucci 1988: 246). The DPI’s move to politics, therefore, highlights important issues, choices and constraints faced by Dalit movements today.

III: THE RULES OF THE GAME

LIMITED INNOVATION

‘National strategies’ – what Tilly (1986) terms ‘the existing repertoire’ – according to Kriesi, “set the informal and formal rules of the game for the conflict between new social movements and their adversaries” (quoted in Della Porta and Diani 1999: 202). To attract recruits and mobilise people to protest, it is arguable that social movements need to follow a policy of *limited innovation*. Protest movements may call for a more equal society but they usually contain internal structures, and relationships of power, which appear to contradict this goal. The Dalit movements’ reliance on central, male leaders and their reluctance to take up gender issues are a case in point. To recruit new members protestors need to utilise established institutions and cultural resources (Lipsky 1970: 189, Dalton, Keuchler, Burklin 1990: 14, Plotkin 1993: 22, Jasper 1997: 179). Following one’s ideological imperatives too far or too fast may preclude the levels of mobilisation necessary to challenge oppressive social structures. A movement needs to be recognised by others if it is not to be marginalised as ‘deviant’. The Dalit movement, thus, is articulated in a cultural form that reflects established

socio-political institutions. The danger of such analysis is that it may justify the perpetuation of inequalities within a movement, and delay internal reform. Dalit movements contain frequent references to equality, especially gender equality, to keep those who desire more radical change on board. But the liberatory impulse of these assertions is diluted by the language of 'priorities' in which challenging caste becomes more important than addressing other inequalities. The concept of *limited innovation* enables us to understand the apparent conservatism of social movement action, when compared to the radicalism of their speeches and ideologies.¹

What I term limited innovation explains how Dalit movements campaign for human rights and dignity on the one hand, whilst turning a blind eye to patriarchal abuses on the other. *Penurimai Iyakkam* (PI) (Women's Rights Movement) leaders cited an instance in which a DPI member had got a young Dalit girl pregnant, but then abandoned her. Movement leaders could have influenced the youth to return, the PI insisted, but they failed to co-operate. Eventually a DPI Women's Wing leader took an interest in the case. Silence on 'moral' issues such as the commonly noted negative habits of the Dalit community - smoking, drinking, gambling and wife-beating - may also be understood in terms of limited innovation.² It was common for several members at meetings to be drunk. In fact, as we have seen, the presence of the leader was often seen as an occasion for celebration. A puritanical condemnation of these practices would have conformed to the movement's general emphasis on self-respect and self-determination - and would certainly have been welcomed by Dalit women - but such an innovation may have had the effect of alienating many of the more active and vocal male members. This fear of going too far too fast is intricately bound up with the choice of strategy to be pursued. Political and cultural norms permit radical, and often violent, talk, but they condemn the resort to violence itself. Movement speeches, therefore, frequently raised the prospect of violence and armed struggle in a calculated rhetoric of 'restrained force'. The assertion is that Dalits are capable of devastating violence, but that they are being patient and law-abiding. If a couple of buses are burnt, the message is, be thankful that we did not bring the state to a halt. A

¹ Lipsky (1970: 4), Jasper (1997: 35), and Della Porta & Diani (1999: 156) note how protest is constrained both by protest constituents and the political opportunity structure.

² De Wit (1996: 172-3) notes how excessive drinking amongst male slum dwellers is frequently explained by reference to the nature of their work, insecurity and the conditions in which they live. As he points out, however, women who co-exist in these conditions rarely resort to drink.

rhetorical emphasis on passive resistance may have been counter-productive and displeased the activists, but innovation in *strategy* is limited by the fear of alienating ‘ordinary’ people, upon whose support the movement ultimately depends. “Protest constituents limit the options of protest leaders at the same time that the leader influences their perception of the strategies and rhetoric which they will support” (Lipsky 1970: 4).

TAMIL REPERTOIRES

The ‘rules of the game’ in Tamil Nadu set the context within which Dalit movements operate. The differences between Tamil Dalit movements and those in the north of India owe much to the processes of political development in the different states. When India erupted into protest following V.P. Singh’s decision to implement the findings of the Mandal Commission in 1991, for example, Tamilnadu remained largely unaffected. Positive discrimination in favour of the backward castes has a much longer history in the state, where the Justice Party introduced such measures in the 1920’s. The history of non-Brahmin and Dravidian movement agitation has theoretically ensured a polity that is more responsive to the demands for social justice. “Modern Tamil Politics”, as Washbrook puts it, “is dominated by the rise to power at state level of a ‘Dravidian’ movement whose ideology has been committed to the destruction of the caste system” (1989: 207). As shown in Chapter 2, the protest repertoire of the Self-Respect and Dravidian movements, in their demands for recognition of the Tamil language, and the Tamil State, is familiar today; black flag demonstrations, road-blocks, picketing, and protest meetings. “Movement and counter-movement tend to imitate each other”, as Della Porta and Diani note, “reciprocally adapting particular tactics” (1999: 213). Despite the history of the Indian nationalist movement, the points of reference for Tamil movements largely remain confined to the state (Deliège 1997: 13). Such parochialism is beginning to open itself up to a conception of India that extends beyond the border of the state, but it is still within the bounds of this social construct that we need to understand the struggles of the Tamil Dalits.

“The Dravida Munetra Kazhagam’s (DMK) hold over Tamil political life and culture owes much to its rhetoric of Tamilness” (Rajadurai and Geetha 1996: 551). The Dravidian movement succeeded in prioritising the question of cultural identity to such

an extent that anti-Brahminism, and the agitation against the imposition of Hindi into schools, continue to resonate in Tamil politics.³ Neither the DMK nor the AIADMK, however, had radical economic policies. Their “socialism”, as Rajadurai and Geetha explain, “was but a modern version of benign feudal patrimony where the lord and the slave, the alms-giver and the alms taker are part of a moral universe in which charity is often emphasised at the expense of justice” (1996: 563). These webs of patronage assume the form of clientelism, defined by Banck as the “dispensing of public resources (or the promise to do so) by political power holders/seekers and their respective parties, in exchange for votes and other forms of political support” (1986: 522, Subramanian 1999: 67, Widlund 2000: 35). Resources are extended to the impoverished Dalit population through the mediation of brokers, who are usually party members (de Wit 1996: 17). It is little surprise therefore that Dalit movements have only recently been able to challenge the system. “The Dravidian parties are one of the main causes for the lack of Dalit consciousness in Tamil Nadu”, Mathivanan, a leader of the Working Peasant’s Movement in Myaladuthurai, insisted. “They organised Dalits into their parties giving them petty concessions, and so kept them appeased” (Interview 29/09/99).

IV: THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL PROTEST

STATE & SOCIETY

“For the majority of Indian citizens”, Gupta argues, “the most immediate context for encountering the state is provided by the relationship with government bureaucracies at the local level” (1995: 378). The state, according to the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology (1994), “is a distinct set of institutions that has the authority to make the rules which govern society. It has, in the words of Max Weber, a ‘monopoly on legitimate violence’ within a specific territory”. This definition is somewhat inapt in India, where the coercive power of the higher castes is legitimated by reference to Hindu texts and social custom. In democratic India the state has arrogated the right to punish such infringements of its supremacy, but the institutions of the state are not impermeable to upper caste influence (Jeffrey 2000: 1019, Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 169, Chandhoke 2001: 21). Gupta focuses on the ways in which the state and other

³ The domination of public life by the Brahmins, and the origins of the caste system in Brahmin scriptures, were so articulated that the victory of the DMK over the Congress party in 1967 was depicted as the ‘true’ end to the struggle against colonialism.

institutions “come to be imagined” and discursively constructed (1995: 376). The multiplicity of institutions within the state, he argues, mean that it cannot be viewed as a unitary entity. Gupta’s conception of the relationship between the state and society is useful for an understanding of the Dalit movements’ attempt to challenge the hegemonic configurations of power whilst working with existing political institutions. For many Dalits the state is most ‘concretely’ visible through the provision of government houses, jobs, college places, and ration cards. In this light the state is a vital resource for the majority of Dalits who lack other resources.⁴ Dalit movements, therefore, often accept the legitimacy of the state, which they see as providing them with the means to effect social change, whilst challenging the commitment of the governing party. In Tamil Nadu, as we have seen, the election of the Dravidian parties held out the real prospect of social change. New schemes to eradicate untouchability are frequently launched by politicians determined to portray themselves as committed to equality. In September 1997, for instance, the Chief Minister Karunanidhi vowed to abolish untouchability and announced grants and gratuities for inter-caste marriages that included a Dalit member (Hindu: 1/9/97. See chapter 5 for other such schemes). Even Dalit activists concede that many of the downtrodden have received state benefits.

Jenkins asserts that there are three main reasons for discussing the state when analysing social movements. Firstly, “social movements are inherently political” because they are based on demands for social change. As the state retains the *legitimate* monopoly over the use of violence, social movements require some recognition from the state in order to survive. “Second, the state organises the political environment within which social movements operate”. The structure of opportunities and constraints affects the course of action chosen by a movement. “Thirdly, social movements constitute a claim for political representation” (1995: 16/17. See also: Chandhoke 2001: 19). The Ambedkar People’s Movement was happy to use the opportunities for legal redress to challenge the practice of untouchability in Tamil Nadu. They accepted that the democratic state – “with its participatory processes at all levels, its legal system, its freedom of expression, and the right to

⁴ Despite noting the many failings of the reservations system, Corbridge & Harriss (2000: 217-8) maintain that this does not mean that it is “failing the poor”. Apart from noting the benefits of some reservation schemes, they point to the continuing opposition of the upper castes as an indicator.

protest and organise pressure groups and people's movements – *provides genuine spaces and possibilities for liberation*" (Bangalore Social Action Trust 1998: 130). Given these opportunities the reasons for the emergence of radical protest groups, and the DPI's decision to boycott the elections, require as much explanation as their subsequent move into political competition.

DISCOURSE AND DISCONTENT

Social Movements are said to result from the 'inadequacies of the institutions of interest mediation' (Scott 1991: 9-10, Foweraker 1995: 10). This argument is borne out in Tamil Nadu where non-Brahmins, Other Backward castes, Dalits and Women have organised successively to press their demands for political recognition. The 'inadequacy' of the state however, may be as much a discursive construct as an objective fact, since the perception of institutional performance is highly subjective (Kaase 1990: 95, Fine 1995: 130, Gupta 1995: 381). In Chidambaram, for example, all the candidates were Dalits, but their perceptions of the state were worlds apart. These discursive constructions of the state are as important in assessing the 'failure' of the state as more common and material indices of government performance (Gupta 1995: 589). The Liberation Panthers maintain that Dalits will only be properly represented when they gain separate electorates, and are able to choose their own candidates. They portray the Dalits who stand on behalf of other parties as 'puppets', or as poor children who are rendered disabled so that they can beg for money with which to line the pockets of their 'patron'. This metaphor is highly resonant in India, and it rejects the elite conception of Untouchables as unable to represent themselves.⁵ Any future participation in the electoral process, they insist, will be on new terms. The reason for this transformation in attitudes with regard to the Dravidian parties has been a growing realisation of the limitations of their political and economic programmes. "Those who fought so hard to overthrow the domination of the Brahmins have taken on board the caste scriptures and structure in turn", according to Mr Ravichandran, the Director of the Village Development Society and Convenor of the Marutham Network. "It is the middle caste people who have most land", he continues, "they want to protect this land. They want to protect land rights, so that is

⁵ Metaphor is a crucial means of 'making power visible'. An apt metaphor may succeed in reversing dominant discourses in a way that facts and figures are unable to do. The response accorded to this

why they have to accept the caste system; to ensure that owners remain owners, the slaves remain slaves, and untouchables remain untouchable” (Interview 27/07/99). The hegemonic influence of the Dravidian parties is such that even to move away from a perception of the Brahmins as the real enemy has required the construction of a new political discourse. “The Dravida Kazhagam and the Dravidian parties”, according to ‘Tada’ Periyasami the assistant general secretary of the DPI, “have fooled people for 50 years into thinking that the Brahmins are responsible for the caste system. ... By pin-pointing this one enemy, they have been able to cast all blame on the Brahmins for their own gain” (Interview 03/11/99).

The ‘betrayal of Dravidian ideals’ is a constant theme through which Dalit movements fulfil the dual function of criticising the government on its own terms, and establishing the legitimacy of their own protest. This is achieved by projecting protest as the continuation of “past political movements whose struggles have long since been vindicated as just” (Rochon in Della Porta & Diani: 1999: 184). Other means of legitimisation include *grievance extension*, whereby activists cast their particular struggle as part of a wider project (Jasper 1997: 273). Dalit Movements thus, employ the language of ‘human rights’ to insist that their struggle has universal resonance, and they compare themselves to other protests that are widely regarded as legitimate. The struggle against apartheid is often referred to, and imprisoned comrades are likened to Nelson Mandela. The implication is that ultimately their cause will triumph and the oppressors will be brought to justice. Such images have become vital for morale in recent years as the Dravidian parties have increasingly regarded Dalit movements as a challenge to their monopoly on state power. Dalit votes have usually been seen as easily bought either with promises or financial rewards. Backward Caste groups, by contrast, are perceived to be more organised and conscious of their interests. They are also the communities that stand to lose most by the social uplift of the Dalits. Challenges to the hegemony of the Dravidian parties have arguably made these organisations less responsive to Dalit demands. Thus, “in the past few years the DMK has been anti-Dalit” (Mathivanan interview: 29/09/99). Dalit movements recognise that the politics of numbers will count against them in most instances, and the likelihood of attaining power by contesting state elections is minimal. In this

picture of Dalit politicians showed that it was accepted as accurate by most of those present. See Melucci (1988) for a more detailed discussion of this.

situation the electoral boycott is truly a 'weapon of the weak'; it requires few resources, yet it is a powerful form of moral protest that denies the legitimacy of the political process. Abandoning the boycott and contesting the elections was hard, not only because they stood little chance of winning, but also because it implied a tacit acceptance of the legitimacy of political institutions. So what led the Liberation Panthers to enter the political arena?

V: THE MOVE TO POLITICS

ABANDONING THE BOYCOTT

Seated outside his residence in a Madras housing block, and surrounded by the hangers-on who stayed with him and acted as 'body-guards', Thirumavalavan spelt out exactly why they had taken this decision. The litany of causes was familiar to me, as it must have been to all present, from the series of speeches delivered across the state to inform members of the change in 'procedure', and convince them that it was required. The fundamental reason for the alteration was quite simply the lack of impact; Most people continued to vote anyway. By failing to direct the voting of sympathisers, and by withholding the votes of activists, the boycott unwittingly profited the parties who were most antithetical to the concerns of the movement. Not only were caste-based parties elected, they were able to use the boycott to depict the DPI as undemocratic. This put pressure on the state to clamp down on them, legitimised such repression, and further alienated the people from the movement. Having decided to abandon the boycott, the movement did not immediately make the transition to contesting the elections. "Who to vote for is the secondary question", Thirumavalavan insisted, "but who not to vote for is the primary question" (Interview: 03/11/99). In this light the decision appears to have been a purely pragmatic and defensive move, but there are other factors that deserve closer examination.

"No movement which is divorced from the masses can achieve victory", Thirumavalavan told the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights. He recalled how he was recurrently surprised by the attitudes of the people. "Somebody said 'go to the people and they will teach you a lesson'. Only after I went to the people did I understand this. It is not only in the revolutionary struggle that we have to take up arms. We must also take up the arms of parliamentary democracy – this is what the people said" (Speech 01/12/99). As Varshney points out: "Unless we assume short-

sightedness, the subaltern seem to think that democracy is working for them" (cited in Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 269). Talking to Dalits, activists and non-activists alike, this statement rings true. The rejection of democratic politics was never popular amongst the members of Dalit movements who wished their particular leader to enter politics to give them a voice and a source of patronage. In relation to the American Rights Movement, Lipsky noted the "basic problem of overcoming the inhibitions of the people who may be angry at the conditions but are politically unradical or possess some social stakes" (1970: 189). This problem is compounded in Tamil Nadu, where the clientelist State offers tangible rewards to those who vote. Individual participation in movements is driven by a variety of motivations and expectations that may be as attractive as tangible material benefits. Such benefits include a sense of doing the right thing, a sense of meaning and purpose, a desire to appear in the papers, or a hope for love or friendship. The assertion that intangible rewards will be insufficient to *sustain* levels of mobilisation, however, appears to be justified (Lipsky 1970: 165). Social movements are ill-equipped to deal with the passage of time, according to Offe (1990: 238). He insists that movements thrive where they have rights to protest, dramatic events that inspire a reaction, and "the spontaneous motivation of relevant sections of the population", all of which may be withdrawn from the movement (ibid.).

MEDIATED MESSAGES: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MEDIA

Social movements seek to mobilise as many protestors as possible to maximise their impact. The rhetoric required to maintain commitment amongst activists, however, may threaten to disrupt the social order and thereby alienate potential supporters or provoke repressive counter-movements. A movement's ability to articulate its own identity, therefore, is constrained by the knowledge that the recognition of others is vital to the process of identity formation (Melucci 1995: 48). The assertion of a positive identity can always be contested. The assertion that Dalit drummers are comparable to Bharata Natyam dancers is meaningless whilst they are still required to play at funerals and weddings for little or no remuneration. "The ability to impose negative and stigmatised definitions of the identity of other groups, constitutes, effectively, a fundamental mechanism of social domination" (Della Porta & Diani 1999: 92). The media is crucial to get the movement's message across to a wider public. Jasper goes so far as to assert that there would be no "movement identity

without ratification from the news media” (1997: 288). Given that only the more established Dalit movements receive any coverage at all I would dispute the essentialism inherent in this claim, but the significance of the media is undeniable (Kaase 1990: 95, Rucht 1990: 160, Castells 1997: 106). The number of people engaging in protest is a tiny proportion of the population (see Chapter 4). Consequently, most people’s perceptions of the movement are filtered through the news media. One problem of continuing the boycott was that the media portrayed the DPI as extremists, so the moral argument that they were attempting to get across was often reversed. Conflicting definitions of identity are not necessarily equal. The state is in a privileged position to marginalise the movement, and the Liberation Panthers lack the communications infrastructure to contest these dominant definitions.⁶ Karunanidhi, the current Chief Minister, owns newspaper and television networks through which to disseminate his ideas and present himself as a champion of the Dalits. Substantial concessions by the government can also render a movement the “victim of its own partial success” (Offe 1990: 238). The state can present itself as responsive to movement demands thereby reducing the urgency of calls to arms and presenting movement radicals as violent extremists who are not prepared to negotiate (Krishna 1996: 241). Abandoning the boycott in 1999 affirmed the democratic credentials of the DPI and confounded their depiction as militants. Entering the political equation shortly before an election also assured them of coverage. “When we boycotted the elections”, Thirumavalavan points out, “not even 20,000 people heard Thirumavalavan speak. When I stood in the election, two and a quarter lakh people voted for me, and recognised me” (Speech: 01/12/99).

These figures highlight a politically significant shift in support, and emphasise the difference that a proactive and high profile campaign can make to public responses. The ‘stagnation’ of movement activity, in Offe’s (1990: 238) terms, rendered the institutional alternatives more attractive. Thirumavalavan highlighted five forces which the DPI wanted to exclude from political office: “Caste fanatics, communal forces, corrupted forces, opportunists and criminal forces” (Interview 03/11/99). The Panther’s boycott of the polls had much greater significance than the removal of their

⁶ Corbridge & Harriss (2000: 204) highlight the partiality of the press in their discussion of the Chunduru massacre in Andhra. They note that the media downplayed upper caste violence and exaggerated the violence of the Dalits.

votes from the contest, it allowed these forces to compete for, or buy off, the votes of other Dalits. The number of people who joined the boycott may have been negligible, but the numbers who turned out to vote for an alternative were politically significant. Although Dalit parties did not win any seats in the election, they could have swung the vote in several constituencies. The influence of media coverage and the appeal of 'personality politics' in Tamil Nadu were revealed in the performance of the two most high-profile Dalit contestants; Dr. Krishnasamy and Mr. Thirumavalavan, both of whom gained a large percentage of the votes cast. By providing a viable and independent alternative, the DPI not only harnessed the votes of politically active Dalits who might have been wary of engaging in extra-institutional action, the media coverage and political campaigning gave them access to Dalits who had never voted before. Hindering the political ambitions of opposing forces is vital, Dalit movements insist, because they use the machinery of the state to further oppress the Dalits. By entering the polls, furthermore, Dalit movements ensured that their votes mattered. In the subsequent competition, movement demands had to be addressed in order to garner Dalit votes.

VI: THE STRUCTURES OF POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY

REPRESSION AND RITUAL

In the discursive constructs of the Dalit movements the government is certainly an oppressor. The police are often accused of abuses, and are frequently described as the main enemy of the Dalits. Whether the actions of the police are autonomous of the ruling party or not is hard to ascertain, but in recent years the "exercise of power has become increasingly cynical" (Desroches 1991: 8. cf. Brass 1996: 36). Under the pretext of 'terrorist threats' governments have been able to introduce draconian laws, which are increasingly used against protestors (ibid. 1991, Amnesty International ASA 20/12/98). One such piece of legislation is the Goondas Act. "In the past year alone", Thirumavalavan told members at a day long meeting in Madurai, "Karunanidhi has jailed 46 members of the Liberation Panthers under the Goondas Act. Who is a Goonda? What does the Goondas Act say? Those brewing illicit liquor, those preparing intoxicating drugs, those inciting violence against people, those working as pimps" (13/07/99). Trained as lawyer, Thirumavalavan uses his knowledge of the law to counter the state version of events and to render power visible. Other anti-terrorist acts have also been passed and used to suppress protest.

One of the most widely used provisions is the ability to make ‘preventative’ arrests. As the DPI have grown in popularity and radicalism, the government has become increasingly wary of their activities and has tried to minimise the impact of their meetings. “For a district meeting”, Thirumavalavan declaimed, “he (Karunanidhi) arrests members across the entire state! In Tamil Nadu to date, no government has ever carried out such blatant oppression of an organisation” (Madurai, Speech 13/07/99).

Establishing a sense of threat helps to achieve group cohesion, and meetings are very good at doing this. They are also an exercise in propaganda to convince and recruit new members (Cruces and de Rada 1996: 99). To take the speeches of movement ideologues at face value, therefore, would be foolish. The statements of protest groups “whose primary talents are in dramatising issues”, as Lipsky puts it, “cannot credibly attempt to present data that is considered ‘objective’” (1970: 175). Movement meetings are also ritualistic – they are “highly formalised, repetitive clusters of actions, the meanings of which are ... beyond verbal articulation” (Bloch quoted in Boholm 1996: 2). Collective ‘rites’ emphasise moral commitments, whip up emotions, and reinforce group solidarity (Kerzer 1988: 122, Taylor and Whittier 1995: 176). As such, the speech-acts on these occasions are indicative of the values of the group. These values, and the speeches that both shape and reflect them, however, cannot be divorced from the conditions that give rise to them (Fine 1995: 130, Johnston & Klandermans 1995: 18). Merely articulating a sense of oppression does not mean that a group actually is oppressed. Conversely, not all incidents of repression are reported in the media, especially if the group in question lacks social resources. So, if the views expressed at meetings remain confined to the immediate audience, the battle for public opinion will be lost. From this perspective ‘big events’, and extra-ordinary occurrences stand out in their ability to shape the context of political action. “Our symbolic universes can change quite suddenly”, as Jasper notes. “Events shock us when they sum up our anxieties, allowing us to name what we feel threatened by” (1997: 91). Events can force a movement to reassess their positions by emphasising the possibilities and constraints that affect their choice of action, or by instilling them with a sense of urgency. Such events, according to Offe (1990: 238), are conducive to *protest*, but two such events stand out as indicative of, or explaining, the DPI’s move to politics.

VII: 'MOMENTS OF MADNESS': THE IMPORTANCE OF 'EVENTS'

TESTING THE WATER, BREAKING THE BAN

On the 12th of June 1999, Thirumavalavan broke the ban on holding public meetings in Perambalur. He and two hundred others were arrested when they staged a road blockade to "protest against police violence and bias". Between the 12th and 13th of June five government owned buses were pelted with stones and set alight, and another five had their windows smashed in as traffic was brought to a halt in several areas. In response to the violence, the papers reported, Thirumavalavan and 120 others were released that afternoon (Maalai Malar 13/06/99). Though newspapers depicted those engaging in violence as thugs who were to be condemned, the destruction of government buses is an established form of protest that all parties in Tamilnadu engage in. The decision to defy the ban at that moment in time is instructive. The movement was engaged in debates about whether they would be able to retain their independence if they joined the political process, and many of the activists were unhappy about the prospect of losing their radical identity. "The cohesion of relatively powerless groups may be strengthened by militant, ideological leadership which questions the rules of the game and challenges their legitimacy", as Lipsky observes (1970: 165). For some time the agenda of the DPI had been set by aggressors, who had rendered protest meetings little more than exercises in condemnation. Those attracted to the movement by its image as a force who returned a blow for a blow, were asking why they were not engaging in revenge attacks (Periyasami, DPI General Secretary, 30/06/99). In that situation the deliberate courting of arrest, the protests which followed and the subsequent release of the protestors in Perambalur gave members a sense of power, and the ability to achieve results. It was presented as a warning to the government of what would happen if patience ran out. At the same time, however, efforts were made to legitimise the event and to retain the moral high ground that is usually the prerogative of the victims of violence. Perambalur was shown to be the last straw, one banning order too far that had convinced them of the need to 'secure this basic right to protest'. "I did not plan this meeting, or warn people that I might be arrested", Thirumavalavan insisted, "I turned up on the spot" (Speech at Wedding 16/06/99). The emphasis on the spontaneity of the event is to insist that the violence was neither orchestrated nor incited. Instead it gives the impression that

he is supported by a large number of followers willing to take risks and act in extra-institutional ways to secure their objectives.

Whether the action was taken to this end or not, the show of strength in Perambalur gave the democratic wing of the DPI the authority to effect a change in movement procedure. Rhetorical threats of disorder now carried more weight than beforehand. The government, they declared, had tested the waters and 'got a real fright'. Yet, reading between the lines, it was as much a case of the DPI testing the waters as well. The Government was prepared to arrest Thirumavalavan they discovered, and even if it was 'forced' to release him again, the media coverage focused on the burnt out buses and denounced the thugs who engaged in such violence. The boost to morale gained by the 'victory' can hardly have offset the negative impact on public opinion. Perambalur, therefore, was recast as a show of the political muscle that could be turned against the ruling party in the polls. The DPI were re-cast as a radical party that could revitalise parliament but the move to politics remained contentious, partly because there were no obvious political allies for the movement to endorse. Both Subramanian's (1999: 37) notion of 'organisational pluralism', and the institutional self-transformation model pre-suppose a receptive political environment in which there are possible coalition partners for a movement or at least some institutional provision for political parties.⁷ The AIADMK was corrupt, in disarray, and had been the first party to afford the BJP a foothold in the state. The communal alliance was presented as the cause for disillusionment with the DMK, so many resented talk of an alliance with the AIADMK. There was, however, no real alternative. Mooppanar, the leader of the Tamil Maanila (State) Congress, had mooted the possibility of a Third Front after falling out with the DMK, but it lacked any political standing. "A Third Front", as Thirumavalavan insisted, "is a Karunanidhi protection Front" (Speech 13/07/99). The day after this statement the AIADMK clinched a seat sharing deal with Congress. One of the main reasons for contesting Deliège's (1997: 13) assertion that Paraiyar's have no sense of the Indian nation, is that Lok Sabha elections have repeatedly shown that voters prefer the regional parties to be allied to a national political party. Lacking this advantage the TMC Front was a weak option. The choice appeared to be between supporting the AIADMK, or urging Dalits to vote tactically

⁷ Offe (1990) notes the importance of the provisions in the German system, which provide state funding to parties that acquire a certain percentage of the popular vote.

against the DMK/BJP. It was at this point of indecision that the events in Tirunelveli occurred.

THE NELLAI MASACRE

It is easy to over-emphasise the importance of dramatic moments in time, but they are never divorced from other processes and developments that occur in the build-up to, and during, an 'event'. What happened in the space of half an hour on the banks of the river Thamiraparani in Nellai (Tirunelveli) on the 23rd of July, however, was instrumental in reconfiguring Tamil politics at least for a few months, and possibly for good. Hundreds of protestors took to the streets in a procession to highlight the plight of tea-estate workers, demand better wage conditions, and the release of 652 workers who had been arrested on a similar demonstration in June. The demonstration was led by the TMC, and by Dr. Krishnasamy of the Puthiya Tamilagam which had kept the dispute in the limelight for over a year. The march concluded at the collector's office, where the leaders attempted to present a petition, but the police massed at the gate of the Collectorate were reluctant to grant admission to the leaders' jeep. Annoyed by this, the demonstrators took up slogans demanding that their leaders be allowed in. Up until this point the march had been entirely peaceful, and nothing had happened to suggest the events which followed.⁸ In the words of the Frontline reporters, "the Special Action Force men suddenly swung into action, they tried to chase away the demonstrators using force". The crowd responded by throwing stones, and then the police appear to have gone berserk. In the course of the inquiry into the events, the police suggested that they had been angered by the crowd's harassment of policewomen. Little, however, can explain the ferocity of their actions. The police started to throw stones back at the crowd and at the vehicle containing the leaders. They fired shots in the air, used tear gas, and then lathi-charged to disperse the crowd, ignoring their own officers who called for restraint.⁹ Fleeing from the police charge the demonstrators had few available avenues of escape. The crowd fled onto the dried up riverbed, and then into the water. "The police did not withdraw even at this stage. Some of them jumped into the water and hit on the heads of volunteers with lathis" (Viswanathan & Muthuhar Saquf, Frontline: 13/08/99). Those attempting to rescue

⁸ I heard various accounts from movement activists but was unable to verify their stories. In what follows therefore, I shall draw upon newspaper accounts and articles.

people from drowning were not spared neither were journalists covering the event. Forced into the water, and attacked by police on both banks of the river, seventeen people, including a small baby, lost their lives and many more were said to be missing.

The cases against the estate workers arrested in the previous demonstration were hastily withdrawn. Had this action been taken earlier, those seventeen people including the wife and child of one of the detainees, need not have died. The main outcome though, was political. Dr.Krishnasamy described the police action as “pre-planned and politically motivated”, and compared the attack to Jallianwallahbagh. The TMC, who had entered into an electoral alliance with the PT, joined them in a fast on the 31st of July to demand that action be taken against the police. Amongst those who took part were several Muslim and Dalit leaders, including the Liberation Panthers. A significant fall-out of the massacre, S.Viswanathan noted, “is a consolidation of the oppressed sectors, particularly Dalits, in Tamil Nadu”. This “development is seen as having the potential to bring about substantial changes”, he adds, “not only of electoral politics in the state but in the nature of political activism in general and the approach of mainstream political parties to organisations that represent Dalits’ aspirations” (Frontline: 27/08/99). The idea that unity arises in crisis is subscribed to by several Dalit movements, and so it proved in this instance. The TMC is the state wing of the Congress party that split off from its parent body in 1996, after the Congress decided to support the AIADMK. As a result, its constituent base is wider than that of the Dalit movements, and includes both backward and forward castes. When the DPI, the Bahajun Samaj Party, and the Republican Party of India joined the TMC-PT Front on the 3rd of August, however, it began to be depicted as a ‘Dalit Front’.

VIII: INSTITUTIONALISATION

A SHARE OF POWER

Four days after joining the front, Thirumavalavan attended a flag-raising ceremony in Virudhunagar to explain the decision and to ask for the co-operation of members. On the day of the massacre itself, the DPI Governing Body had met in the north of the

⁹ A ‘lathi’ is a wooden cane or truncheon carried by police in India. In a ‘lathi charge’ this implement is used against protestors or rioters with some force.

state and determined not to extend their support to any one party. Here, he posed the question: "Can we still vote for Dravidian Parties after this?" The Third Front was presented as a real alternative to the two main parties, because for the first time Dalit leaders were able to unite and to negotiate their terms: "If we vote for you", Thirumavalavan is said to have told Moopanar, "you must vote for us. In future we can only ally with political parties on the basis that we both have a share of power" (Speech: 7/08/99). He asserted that entering the political arena would not dampen their 'warrior spirit' or their determination to fight for liberty. "To change the monopoly on power we also need to claim a share", appears to be a statement of the obvious. In the context of Dalit struggles, however, the ability to escape dependence and represent themselves is of revolutionary import. In a state where Murugesan, the DMK Melavalavu *panchayat* president and five others were murdered for presuming to sit in office above their backward caste constituents, such a stance has been inconceivable until recently. Entering democratic politics brings with it, responsibilities as well as rights. The absence of retaliatory violence in the wake of the Nellai atrocity, in this light, was seen as a welcome shift in Dalit politics. On the sixteenth of June Thirumavalavan addressed those attending the wedding of a movement leader. Only when we are united, he said "will we know our real strength, will we be able to know who we are. Only when we are fully conscious of who we are, will the exercise of votes in the election be meaningful and useful. Due to our awakening, we have brought about a small change in procedure ... *in future our votes are for us*". The ramifications of this 'procedural change' are redrawing the political map of Tamil Nadu.

IX: CONCLUSION

The Liberation Panther's transition, from movement to institutional politics, initially appears to follow Offe's model of institutional self-transformation. Adopting the path of parliamentary politics adds impetus to a movement by opening up extra resources, enabling coalitions with others, and tapping into the support of sympathisers who will vote but not protest. In this phase, Offe maintains, movements tend to restructure themselves to create formal organisations with membership cards, dues, newspapers and structures. The leader-centred nature of most Tamil movements gives them an element of organisation from their very inception, but those movements that wish to enter party politics do tend to formalise processes of affiliation. The Bahujan Samaj

Party in Uttar Pradesh instituted a policy of 'one rupee, one vote', referring to the membership fee and the political orientation of the organisation. This policy has not been adopted in Tamil Nadu yet, but some movements wanted to. The TDLM issued membership cards to people, and the DPI was preparing a rule-book towards the end of 1999 - to inform members of the chain of responsibility. The notion of an institutional learning process is very pertinent, therefore, but the particular chronology of the model is less so. Offe posits a period of stagnation as preceding the move to politics, but the established repertoire of protest in Tamil Nadu suggests a different sequence of transition. Movements have to prove their strength and durability before established parties accept them as coalition partners, rather than buying their unconditional support. The institutionalisation of a movement therefore, is, paradoxically, most likely when it is most engaged in extra-institutional activity. The movement, according to this model, does not reach a plateau from which there are few means of development. Instead the movement enters party politics at its moment of greatest impact. Each of the major Tamil parties in turn has reached a crescendo of protest activity before being granted grudging admittance to 'normal politics'. The next chapter focuses on the experience of the DPI in the 1999 elections. Merely deciding to contest the polls, it is clear, is insufficient to guarantee the unhindered participation of Dalit voters. Established interests benefited from the political inaction of the Dalit movements and were not prepared to relinquish their power. The compulsions and rewards of institutionalisation are powerful indeed, as Offe shows, and they are not achieved without a struggle.

CHAPTER NINE: 'VOTING FOR OURSELVES' Dalit Politics and the 1999 Elections in Tamil Nadu¹

"In Chidambaram Dalit people were prevented from voting for their chosen leader. The thugs of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Vanniyar Union attacked Dalits with such impunity that it has become questionable whether India is an Independent or Democratic nation. If India is in truth a democratic country, then there are 128 places in Chidambaram constituency that require re-polls. In the face of this violence we are engaged on a peaceful hunger fast to display our faith in democracy. ... Even after 52 years of Independence our people do not have their basic rights, cannot even go to the polls, and yet we are called extremists."

(Saravanan: Puthiya Tamilagam Activist: 12/09/99).

I: INTRODUCTION

THE ELECTION IN CHIDAMBARAM

In electoral terms the formation of a Third Front, by the Tamil State Congress (TMC) and its allies, was an unmitigated failure. The Front, which comprised numerous Dalit and Muslim Parties, gave a voice to the minorities but failed to win a single seat in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections in Tamil Nadu. Across the state the Front was unable to challenge the dominant electoral coalitions that lined up behind the two Dravidian parties. In Chidambaram constituency however, the leader of the Liberation Panthers (DPI) came second in a hard fought contest. Of 732, 994 votes polled, Thirumavalavan received 225, 768 ballots.² Speaking at a Conference organised by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights on the 1st of December 1999, Thirumavalavan gave his assessment of the result: "Even if I stand in the next election in Chidambaram", he said, "I will only get two and a quarter lakh votes. I will not get any more than that. During canvassing I was clear to my comrades: 'the people's

¹ Most of my informants were Dalits involved in movement activity, and in the charged political atmosphere it was not always possible to get a balanced picture of events. Consequently, this chapter may at times appear to present a movement perspective.

² The results for Chidambaram constituency were as follows:

Ponnusamy, E. (PMK):	3,45,331
Thirumavalavan, R (TMC):	2,25,768
Sumathy, T (INC):	1,50,794
Others	2,412

E. Ponnusamy (PMK) was declared elected by a margin of 1,19,563 votes.

Total Electorate: 11,10,229

Votes Polled: 7,32,994

Source: The Hindu Newspaper, October 8, 1999.

consciousness is good, but I cannot believe that we will win. If we are allowed to vote without violence – 3 lakh votes, if we have to vote against violent opposition – 2 lakh votes’. That is what I predicted, that is what happened. No matter how many times I stand there that is what will happen” (Speech 01/12/99). This chapter draws on interviews, press reports and independent inquiry findings into the election in Chidambaram constituency to examine the position of Dalit movements and Dalit politics in Tamil Nadu. Fundamental to this enquiry are questions about what happens when the Dalits challenge their habitual subordination and assert their political rights: How they articulate their political aspirations and changing identity formations, what the response of the state and other castes is, and what Dalit movements can learn from this election.

On the day after the first round of the 1999 Indian Lok Sabha elections in Tamil Nadu the national press was positive. “Voter turnout in the ‘Vanniyar –belt’ was uniformly high”, the Hindu reported. There was a suggestion of some malpractice in the assertion that, “Dalits were prevented from voting by some groups in parts of Chidambaram constituency, and they retaliated in areas where their presence was stronger. ... But police said, that the instances were brought to their notice ‘within minutes’ and they were able to prevent any untoward incidents” (Hindu 5/09/99). The news emerging from eyewitness and independent accounts, however, tells a different story.³ DPI activists, Palani Kumar and Kamaraj, spoke of booths being seized, movement activists suffering severe violence, huts being burnt, and a partisan police force. “In most of the villages visited in Chidambaram constituency Dalit people had been threatened not to cast their vote on polling day”, according to the report by the Independent Initiative team.⁴ “Polling agents belonging to the DPI were attacked and people had been physically attacked, their huts burnt and looted by the upper castes led by the PMK (The Toiler’s Party)” (I.I Report: September 1999: 21). Vanniyar thugs had warned Dalits not to cast votes and those Dalits who did try to vote often

³ I did not observe any of the incidents in Chidambaram personally, neither did I travel through the area during the days immediately after the election. To do so at that time would have been dangerous. This account therefore draws heavily upon accounts that received wide press coverage and were accepted as being independent. Their work was able to cover the area far more comprehensively than I, as a single researcher, would have been able to do.

⁴ “Independent Initiative is a public interest organisation headed by Justice V.R.Krishna Iyer, Former Supreme Court Judge” (I.I Report, September 1999: page 1). This organisation monitored the poll process in Perambalur and Chidambaram, and the findings of their teams give credence to allegations that the established parties connived in an extreme campaign against Thirumavalavan.

found that they had been pre-empted. "I saw with my own eyes", an Arcot Lutheran Church pastor told me; "At eleven o'clock when they should have been voting there was a line of women standing outside the Church telling me that they could not vote", because 'their votes had already been cast' (Interview: 26/09/99).

The seizing of polling booths, denial of voting rights and the use of violence were mostly confined to villages where Dalits were in a minority. In villages where they were dominant there were examples of Dalits engaging in violence against the Vanniyars as well. In Alapakkam 45 Vanniyar huts were razed to the ground, goods worth Rs.9,00,000/- were looted, and around one hundred Vanniyars were prevented from voting. Similar scenes were witnessed in Kilpoovanikuppam (I.I Report Sept 1999: 23). "Though accusations came from both sides", as an article in the Tamil magazine *Nandan* concluded, "burned houses and looted goods show that the downtrodden have suffered the most" (Sonamandan Sept 16-30: 13). The article cited the People's Union for Civil Liberty's Commission, which stated that at least 50 polling booths had been in the hands of one party and that re-polls should be conducted. Naresh Gupta, the Election Commissioner insisted that "only if ballot boxes are seized or ballot papers are torn up will there be a re-poll in Chidambaram". "There is also a rule", the magazine reminded him, "that voters should not be threatened, and this regulation has been fully violated" (Sonamandan Sept 16-30: 14). Illamvazhudi lay in the Government hospital in Cuddalore, his arms and face in plaster after he tried to ward off a petrol bomb that was thrown at him. "I can't stand it", he declared, "they say it is my duty to vote. Is this the price of duty?" (Kaasi 1999: 31).

II: PARADOXICAL MARGINALITY: DALITS & THE POLITICAL PROCESS PROTEST AND EXCLUSION

A week after the citizens of Chidambaram had turned out in the first phase of the 1999 Lok Sabha election, there was a gathering of a different kind in Madurai.⁵ The sun glared down on the dusty streets, people sheltered under umbrellas, or lingered in the shade of trees and tea stalls. In front of the railway station, a knot of people were

⁵ Similar protest fasts were held in towns and cities across the state. These "common rites serve not only to make these far flung individuals feel part of a larger organisation; they also make the public

gathered around a microphone, huddling together under an awning that kept the worst of the heat away. Programmes, magazines and papers fluttered as the group attempted to fan themselves, and two large drums of water were wheeled up in a tri-cycle to slake their thirst. The attention was focused on the procession of speakers who made their way to the microphone to denounce what they saw as electoral malpractice, and caste prejudice. Throughout the proceedings one theme was recurrent. All present were anxious to point out the restraint of their approach in contrast to the violence of the governing party and its allies. "We have never held hunger fasts before", the assistant state secretary of the DPI, Saktivel, declared. "I have spoken at road blockades, rail blockades, protests, demonstrations and rallies, but our primary desire today, is to follow a path of non-violence" (Speech 12/09/99). Behind this rhetoric of victimisation, innocence and democratic conviction lay a warning to the state authorities. "Do not think that we, the Liberation Panthers, are only capable of such quiet modes of protest", Saktivel cautioned. "We too can burn buses, we too can set huts ablaze, we too can incite violence, and we too can disrupt the rule of law in this country --- but we have taken it as our duty to protect the law" (Ibid.). The implication is that it was that the opponents of the movement that were anti-democratic.

Deliège has coined the phrase 'paradoxical marginality' to express the "ambiguity of the untouchables' position which is at the same time inside and outside the system" (1997: 104). Deliège is referring here to the fact that the untouchables are "socially excluded but economically indispensable" (1997: 104). It is my contention that the election in Chidambaram exhibits how this 'paradoxical marginality' extends into the political sphere and has defined the position of Dalits in Tamil politics over the course of the last century. The Scheduled Castes constitute 18.5% of the population in Tamil Nadu, but they are not equally dispersed. In 'reserved' constituencies, such as Chidambaram, they comprise nearly 35% of the electorate.⁶ Dalits are indispensable

interpret the actions of the different groups of people as part of the same organisation, the same political group" (Kerzer 1988: 21).

⁶ The 1965 Census of India, South Arcot District Handbook Vol.1 records the major characteristics and proportions of the caste communities in the area. Vanniyars constitute 32% of the population and the Paraiyars 25%. Most other castes are present only in insignificant numbers. The Karthaka Vellalars comprise 6% of the population, the Idayars 4%, and the Brahmins 1.5%.

The figures for the Paraiyar caste are slightly ambiguous since there is also a category of Adi-Dravidars. Adi – is a prefix meaning 'original', and the term Adi-Dravidar is a generative term for the 'original Dravidians' – or Scheduled Castes. In my field work the term was commonly seen to be a term of reference for the Paraiyar caste.

to the process of electoral competition both as a vote-bank, and because certain seats are reserved for Dalit candidates. Simultaneously they are excluded from the system, by being denied access to real decision making power and responsibility. Since the 1990s Tamil Dalit movements have tried to move their concerns into the centre of the political process, by forming independent parties which truly represent their interests.⁷ Democracy is commonly perceived to be the rule of the people, by the people and for the people. “Even so, ‘ordinary people’ do not rule themselves directly, but through representatives whom they choose through the act of voting” (Boholm 1996: 8, cf. Manin et al. 1999: 4). It is this problematic of representation that has come to dominate Dalit discourse on the political process today, and is the reason for the continuing marginality of Dalits in the politics of Tamil Nadu. As they have become more conscious of their rights, and more organised as a community, Dalits are increasingly reluctant to be represented by others. “For fifty years”, Dr Krishnasamy MLA states, “we have been used by all political parties, duped by them and betrayed by them ... Now we are voting for ourselves” (Speech 26/11/99).⁸

SEPARATE ELECTORATES: PART OF THE WHOLE, BUT A PART APART

At the Round Table Conference in 1931 Ambedkar argued that the Untouchables would be unable to select candidates who really represent their interests unless they were empowered with the entitlement to vote separately from the rest of the population. When Gandhi went on a ‘fast unto death’ to condemn this move he presented himself as the representative of Untouchable interests. Separate electorates, he insisted, would drive an irreversible wedge between the Untouchables and the rest of society. Ambedkar finally backed down, and the resultant Poona Pact established that there would be constituencies that were reserved for untouchable *candidates*, but were open to voters of all castes (Joshi 1986: 12, Zelliott 1996: 168, Guru Feb 25,

“The Paraiyars”, the report concludes, “form the backbone of the agricultural labour in the District. In rural parts, they are treated as a polluting caste. They usually live in cheris which have separate drinking wells” (Census of India 1961 edited by P.K. Nambiar: Part X-III: pp28-9)

⁷ In 1996, Puthiya Tamilagam – a party mostly drawn from the ex-untouchable Pallar caste – contested the Legislative Assembly elections. Dr.Krishnasamy was elected as an MLA at this time. The Republican Party of India and the Bahujan Samaj Party have representatives in Tamil Nadu, but they have failed to emulate the success of their northern counterparts. Both of these parties have lost support to the more radical PT and DPI. It will be interesting to see whether the Liberation Panthers can sustain their support now that they have entered the political arena.

⁸ The election in Chidambaram, thus, was articulated in terms of identity and citizenship. The Dalits were attempting to escape their image as apathetic, submissive, and politically dependent, and to ‘vote for themselves’ in defiance of the locally dominant caste.

2000). This compromise was based upon the idea of proportionality. Since J.S. Mill many political theorists have assumed an assembly to be representative insofar as it mirrors the composition of the electorate. Pitkin (1967) challenges this assumption and argues that simply guaranteeing all sectors of society a voice in parliament does not mean that their concerns will be accommodated (in Manin et al 1999: 32). It is also questionable whether proportionality can ensure that every group is represented. Those elected from reserved seats are all, necessarily, Dalits but they are seen (and more importantly, presented) as the pawns of the parties for which they stand. Dalit politicians are commonly seen as unable to speak out against the party line, or as careerists who are out to better themselves but not the community. Of course there are exceptions to the rule, and there is a suggestion that some work 'behind the scenes' to ensure that improvements are made, but representation is an issue precisely "because politicians have goals, interests and values of their own" (Manin et al. 1999: 29). Dalit movements have consistently insisted that the established political parties do not represent their interests. The significant numbers of people who were prepared to vote for Dalit parties in this election suggests that this perception is widespread. By requiring each party to field Dalit candidates, reservations mean that "minority leaders themselves are badly divided, owing allegiance to different parties. While they frequently express the urgent need of forging a cohesive political organisation of minority groups", as Roy and Sisson observe, "considerations of their own political career push them into the lap of various political parties" (1990: 28). In effect, therefore, "the non-Dalits decide which Dalit should win" (Larbeer 1999: 8).

For the political process to be considered as legitimate, "the link between the represented and the representatives must ... be explicated by means of symbols as a morally justified relationship" (Boholm 1996: 8). This has patently failed to happen, and most Dalits I spoke to felt that their concerns were not adequately represented in parliament. "In the realm of electoral politics", as Guru states, "the Dalits argue that they just make a rhetorical appearance in the election manifestos of political parties but never get real representation in terms of access to material, social and cultural resources" (2000: 1). This frequently manifests itself in disillusionment with the political process that can lead to apathy or extra-institutional mobilisation. We have seen that the use of extra-institutional protest to gain political recognition arguably follows an established repertoire of action by which Backward Caste groups who

perceived themselves to be excluded have already gained political power. Contemporary Dalit movements are engaged in a struggle for political recognition and representation.⁹ Too often, being born into a particular community has been taken as the only valid credential for representing that group, but this claim goes against the perceptions of Dalit voters. "It cannot be argued that someone's being born in a particular caste or sex or region or religion makes her or his claim automatically valid and authentic", as Guru insists. "If that were the case, the common Dalits would not have rejected their own leadership in the post-Ambedkar period" (2000: 2).

REPRESENTATION AND IDENTITY

Representation is more than a mechanical exercise. It is rather, the symbolic link between the people and those whom they empower to rule over them. As such, the way in which people perceive their representatives is indicative of the way in which they will perceive political institutions. The prevalent cultural construction of Dalit politicians casts them as having been bought off, and out for their own interests (Roy & Sisson 1990: 28). The parties that they represent, therefore, are depicted as casteist organisations with no real concern for the downtrodden. Elections are a useful barometer of the regard in which the representatives of the people are held. They express, in the words of Steven Lukes, "the symbolic affirmation of the voters' acceptance of the political system and their role within it" (in Spencer 1996: 78). The Liberation Panthers' electoral boycott denied the legitimacy of the institutions of interest mediation. Having entered the political process themselves, therefore, they were obliged to re-articulate their position, and justify their decision. The rhetoric employed to explain the transition to politics focused upon the grievances of the Dalits, and the State's seeming unwillingness or inability to enforce the stipulations of the constitution. The problem they now faced was to establish themselves as fitting representatives of the people.

"For us, for our people", as Ravichandran of VDS put it, "if we are to take political power into our hands then we need to identify ourselves. One Krishnasamy has gone (into the Legislative Assembly) and look at the fuss he makes. If there were many representatives like Dr Krishnasamy, or like Thirumavalavan then imagine what it

⁹ As Nivedita Menon notes, there has always been "a tension between the community, defined in different ways, as the bearers of rights in post-colonial democracies and the individual" (2000: 3).

would be like". Yet so many representatives have gone before, I countered, "would they really raise their voices much?" "They would", Ravichandran insisted, "because they have suffered" (Interview 27/9/99). Representation, according to this construction, is an ability to identify oneself with (and be recognised by) the constituents by whom one is elected. The Dalits of Chidambaram rallied around Thirumavalavan because he was seen as 'one of us'. The coverage that the DPI received prior to their entry into the election increased exponentially thereafter both in the press and on the ground. Whereas the established political parties had to spend a fortune on people to carry out their electoral work, the Independent Initiative observation team found that most of those working for the DPI were volunteers (I.I Report, page 2). Activists from all over the state travelled to the constituency to campaign on Thirumavalavan's behalf. Even non-members proffered their services to canvass during the election. Illangelian, a homeopathic doctor in a neighbouring constituency, summed up the prevailing mood. "Now we have listened to many Thirumavalavan cassettes and speeches, and we have also read news of them in the papers and in magazines", he declared, "... there is a feeling that we must take part" (Interviewed 29/09/99).¹⁰

PARTY POLITICS AND MOVEMENT STRATEGIES

In ten years of non-participation the Liberation Panthers depicted the political process as unrepresentative, corrupt and conducive to compromise. By participating in party politics, Thirumavalavan asserted, "new cadres will become corrupted. They will develop a compromise character" (Interview: 03/11/99). Now that they were entering the morass of political competition themselves, the DPI had to compete for votes whilst insisting that they would not buy into the system. Contesting the elections, therefore, required more than a shift in the way that politics was articulated, it

¹⁰ Returning from a week of campaigning in Chidambaram, Palani Kumar and Kamaraj, who are both DPI activists in Madurai, were convinced that 'Annan' stood a great chance of winning. "Cheri people who have not voted for 52 years in their reserved constituency, because it was in Vanniyar hands, have now witnessed a huge change. Dalit people told us that they would definitely vote for Thirumavalavan" (Interview 10/09/99). "Whichever area in Chidambaram you visit, whichever village you go to", Ravichandran of VDS asserted, "there is the cycle symbol" (Interview 27/09/99). "Even without speaking", the magazine Kalki reported, "Moopanan is gathering crowds" (Kalki 12.09.99). The article painted a picture of huge crowds gathering to hear Thirumavalavan speak. Most of them are Dalit youth from remote villages without facilities it concluded (ibid.). Somandam is an assistant regional leader of the Working Peasant's Movement in Myaladuthurai. To reach his village it is necessary to wade thigh deep through a filthy stream, and then walk a kilometre or so beyond there. His

necessitated a paradigm shift in the way the movement was conducted. Whilst most Dalit movements do incorporate a vision of social change, they have predominantly been concerned with the defence of their constitutional rights. "Political immediacy", as Guru puts it, "dominates the cognitive map of Dalit politics" (Hindu 12/01/99). Movement recruitment, as seen in chapter 5, usually placed the emphasis on potential members to take the initiative and get in touch with the movement. Frequently, however, this stage is by-passed when the movement enters a locality in response to an atrocity or violent incident. All too often Dalit protest has been driven by a sense of outrage rather than an urge to influence or shape public policy. Changing attitudes and increasing political assertion amongst the Dalits has been met by increasing levels of violent resistance from the BC's whose interests they threaten. In this context, rather than attempting to unite people behind an ideological position they have been reduced to condemning atrocities and asking for justice.

The rise of 'Dalit power' has followed a somewhat different trajectory in Tamil Nadu, than the rest of India. Whereas movements elsewhere entered institutional politics and challenged established parties for a share of political power at an earlier stage, as we have seen, the 'egalitarian' Dravidian parties dominated the political map of Tamil Nadu.¹¹ Appeals for justice were initially directed towards the state, therefore, and within certain limits the state responded. "The state in the contemporary world ... is a 'socialist' or 'welfare' state", as T.K. Oommen points out. "Consequently the erstwhile private worries of individuals have become contemporary public issues" (1992: 50). Government sponsored schemes against untouchability, however, raised expectations that were never likely to be sated. Government campaigns for partial change fostered a desire for equality amongst the lowest castes, and awoke a sense of resentment amongst the higher castes in equal measure. As the Dalits have organised in defence of their civil rights they have demanded a more meaningful dissolution of social hierarchy and an extension of the political arena. It was felt that the DMK and the AIADMK had assumed an increasingly casteist hue, partly as a response to the

organisation chose to support Thirumavalavan in the elections because, unlike other party politicians, he was standing "on behalf of the Dalits" (28/09/99).

¹¹ "When the Dalits (Harijans then) supported the Congress in the fifties and sixties, there was no organisation for them", as N.Kalynasundaram of the Hindu put it. "After the advent of the rule of the Dravidian parties they switched their loyalty from the DMK to the AIADMK because of the influence of MGR, and their votes were taken for granted" (Hindu 24/08/99). He goes on to insist that this is no longer the case, and that Dalits are starting to vote for themselves.

electoral mobilisation of important Backward Caste blocs, but also reflecting a reluctance to share power with the Dalit community. Deprived of this institutional channel through which to voice their grievances, Dalit movements sought to mobilise support in extra-institutional organisations.

III: POLLS, POWER & PROTEST

RECRUITING MEMBERS, REACHING OUT

Della Porta and Diani insist that “social movements should seek to mobilise the greatest number of demonstrators possible. From this point of view, protest stands in for elections” (1999: 174). Whilst demonstrations obviously indicate a movement’s popularity, protest bears significant differences from electoral contests. Firstly the media coverage is much more likely to be toned down in the event of a protest group¹², and secondly protests may occur too often for mass participation to be sustained. The majority of Dalits are poor and in precarious jobs. To take one or two days off in a year and support the movement in a political show of strength is one thing. It is quite another to give up a couple of days in a month to condemn the abuse of power in a place that is far from home (cf. Khare 1984:118, J. Massey 1994: 42).¹³ Quite often, Dalit movements simply do not have the time or the resources to advertise, organise and set up a mass meeting. It is also easier to gain police permission to hold a small-scale dharna, than a march that may disrupt traffic and threaten the public order. Reactive protest demonstrations were usually attended by those directly affected, local activists (both from the movement and from affiliated organisations) who faced pressure to turn up, and those who showed up if the leader was present. This mode of organisation has the virtue of highlighting the abuses of the higher castes, keeping the movement in the public eye, and responding to the grievances of afflicted members. It fails, however, to set an agenda around which a movement can canvass for new recruits or a change in policy.

This mode of operation is challenged by the logistics of electoral competition, which is predicated on the assumption that the candidates will ‘go to the people’. Rather than

¹² Alm (1996:115-6) notes that the media usually play down the levels of violence in an area. Corbridge & Harriss (2000: 204) question the independence of the press and show how disproportionate coverage is given to incidences of Dalit violence, whereas violence *against* Dalits receives little coverage.

responding to one atrocity after another, the movement now had to canvass for votes. Where the DPI may have been *accessible* to the people before, they now had to gain *access* to, and convince, people that they were the legitimate representatives of their interests. The fact that all the candidates in the reserved constituencies were Dalits made this task more compelling. "Elections", as Spencer notes, "are also dramas of identity and difference, based on the moral affirmation of moral identifications" (1996: 79). The identity of the Liberation Panther movement has been as much imposed by others as defined by the movement itself. Negative portrayals of the movement can lead to it adopting an 'exclusive identity', which tends to "stress isolation in relation to the outside world" (Della Porta and Diani 1999: 105). The collective 'we' of a movement with such an identity is associated with a particular social group and ideological orientation. On the one hand this draws a distinction between the movement and the establishment (political parties and press), on the other an exclusive collective can more easily be depicted as an extremist group. Entering the elections required the DPI to adopt a more inclusive and flexible identity that would appeal to a wider audience. By allying with the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC), they were able to project themselves as being more than a defensive *caste* organisation.

THE CAST(E) IN THE ELECTION

Although a campaign targeted exclusively at Dalits would have played to the DPI image and strengths, it would have also denied them the chance of winning a seat in the parliamentary elections. The "practice of electing representatives according to geographical constituencies", as Philips observes, "suggests that those who are elected are meant to speak for an area or place, the implication being that interests are relatively homogenous within localities" (1991: 63). There are no geographical concentrations that could form the basis of a Dalit constituency. As long as voting is tied to localities, therefore, no Dalit can afford to ignore the other castes represented in the area. To downplay the significance of the Dalit issue, however, would have been to deny the importance of the move to politics. After all, one of the main criticisms levelled against earlier Dalit leaders, is that "they never tried to establish

¹³ The numbers that turned out on the 30th of June to mark the second anniversary of the murder of the Panchayat president Murugesan and five of his followers at Melavalavu, were many times higher than could ever be gathered for a protest meeting in response to recent incidents.

the self-determination of the Dalits” (Larbeer 1999: 8). The difficulty of deciding what sort of campaign to conduct was compounded by the fact that Thirumavalavan was allied to the TMC rather than completely independent. Whilst presenting itself as a significant alternative to the two main Dravidian parties that have alternated in office since 1967 therefore, the Front had to be wary of alienating traditional TMC voters. Both in the press and on the ground people saw the election as panning out on caste lines. The three major fronts were broadly representative of different caste constituencies. The Paatali Makkal Katchi (PMK- Toilers Party)-DMK-BJP combine were seen to represent the interests of the Vanniyar community, the Most Backward Caste group that is dominant in this part of the state. The TMC-PT-DPI alliance was seen as representing the Dalits and Minorities. The AIADMK-Congress Front in Chidambaram had no obvious caste basis, but they were dependent upon the BC Thevar vote elsewhere in the state. Obviously the support base of the three fronts was neither so clear cut, nor were they exclusive.

The motives that drive a person to vote are far more complex than this elementary division would suggest. The personal appeal of the candidate, the leader of the party, the alliance with a national party, and the policies that they campaign upon can and do influence voting patterns (Fearon 1999: 59). Consequently, privileging the role of caste in elections may present a distorted picture of the multiple processes at work. There is, however, a sense in which politics has “simply provided a new ritual idiom in which villagers could express the kinds of divisions that had always existed” (Spencer 1996: 86). A cursory glance through the press coverage of the Tamil elections would confirm the discursive pre-eminence of caste as a means of analysing the prospects and outcomes of the polls. Whilst all three candidates were Dalits, therefore, they were *symbolically* seen to represent different castes. This symbolism is apparent in the fact that the PMK and the INC candidates both had to assert their Dalit origins. That Thirumavalavan was a Dalit required no rhetorical assertion, the problem facing his candidacy was to insist that he would represent the interests of others. “A large percentage of the TMC supporters are over 50 years of age”, as V.Ganapathi, noted in the Hindu. It was, therefore, “a big question whether they would support the DPI, which came into existence in this part of the state, as a defensive group to stem the influence of the majority Vanniars” (Hindu: August 30, 1999). Given this history, and with the Thevar vote base of the Congress-AIADMK

Front largely absent, the contest in Chidambaram effectively became a bi-polar one: Vanniyars against Dalits, the DMK against the TMC, and BJP against a 'secular' alternative.

THE POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE

The roles of the government and the state are of vital significance to this process of power negotiation. Whether the state is tolerant of, or tries to repress any particular group is crucial to the group's sustainability. Along the wide spectrum ranging from outright repression to accommodation lies a multitude of possible state responses. By choosing to turn a blind eye to local disputes, for example, the police may increase the levels of oppression that subordinated groups are subjected to. Equally, when this group attempts to mobilise in protest, the authorities can render or deny permission for meetings and rallies, make preventative arrests or provide protection, and disrupt or enhance the organisation of a movement. Electoral instability causes established parties to seek new sources of political support and may, therefore, increase the bargaining power of protest groups (Della Porta and Diani 1999: 218).¹⁴ It is instructive that the Dalit movements' interest in politics has coincided with a period marked by frequent elections that have been attended by transformations in electoral alliances. A weak government, however, is just as likely to resort to repression for fear of being toppled. This equation is also rendered more problematic by the fact that social movements need to show their strength before established political parties can be induced to forge an electoral alliance. Such alliances do not necessarily benefit the collective actors as much as the party, since they are rarely in a position of strength when negotiating terms with an established institution.

Indian governments have a history of accommodating or co-opting opponents in order to neutralise them (Krishna 1996: 252, Nandy 1998: 51). This practice is evident in the political mobilisations of the Vanniyar and Thevar Unions. The Vanniyars in this

¹⁴ This trend has already become evident in the subsequent electoral pact between the AIADMK and the TMC-DPI combine, and the more recent decision by the DPI to join the DMK Front. When in power the AIADMK presided over atrocities against Dalits on a scale that is still resonates in movement rhetoric. In opposition, however, they have been willing to condemn state inaction or violence and raise their voices on behalf of the Dalits. The DMK was depicted as the main enemy and as a casteist organisation, until they fell out with the Vanniyar based PMK. Opposition to the PMK was prioritised over opposition to the DMK-BJP combine. In forging an alliance both the DPI and the DMK have compromised on principles and backtracked on rhetorical assertions that portrayed the other as undemocratic and violent.

area, as Vincentnathan amongst others has shown, are an organised force. "Throughout Tamil Nadu, and especially in the South Arcot district with its large Vanniyar population, the Vanniyars damaged government and private property, businesses, busses, lorries, and trains and caused extensive inconvenience to the public during 1988" (Vincentnathan 1996: 500). The culmination of this campaign of extra-legal mobilisation, was the political assimilation of the PMK into the mainstream. This political acceptance recognised that the Vanniyars were an organised political force, but also validated the expression of concerns through extra-institutional agitation. It established, in Tilly's words, a 'repertoire of action'. The DPI in many ways were attempting to emulate this course of action. Whilst the PMK had established their democratic credentials through previous electoral victories, however, the DPI had yet to make the transition from being seen as agitators, to becoming legitimate political representatives.

IV: MOVEMENT AND COUNTER-MOVEMENT

DALIT ASSERTION AND CASTE POLITICS

In its mobilisational phase, the PMK worked with Dalit movements, championed Dalit issues and spoke up on their behalf. It had gained power in the previous election with the support of many Dalit voters. The PMK candidate 'Dalit' Ezhilmalai had gone on to become Health Minister, and had won plaudits for his work, and the party had worked alongside the Liberation Panthers on various issues. Had he stood in opposition to Thirumavalavan, the boundaries of caste allegiance may well have been blurred. In a move that surprised many analysts, however, Ezhilmalai was excluded from the first list of PMK candidates to be announced, and was denied the Chidambaram constituency. He resigned in disgust, enabling Dalit parties to claim that the 'real face' of the 'Vanniyar PMK', and their deep-rooted caste prejudice, had been revealed.¹⁵ Vote for someone who has and will represent your interests, the DPI were now able to say, or forever abandon the prospect of social change. Moopanar described the Third Front as a 'silent revolution' (Hindu, 28/08/99), but for many

¹⁵ On the day that the TMC launched its state wide campaign, backward caste members of a Thevar organisation had hurled stones at the stage when Thirumavalavan came on to speak (Maalai Marusu, Dinakaran, Hindu, 21/08/99). Scared of an escalation of violence, the TMC urged the Election Commission to enlist the help of the army to maintain the peace (Hindu 23/08/99). The Chief Minister condemned the stone throwing (Hindu 23/08/99), but Dalit movements and activists were consistent in pointing the finger of blame at K.Karunanidhi, and Dr. Ramdoss for waging a campaign against the

Dalits in the rural villages of Chidambaram, it was more akin to a revelation. For the first time in fifty years of electoral politics they were presented with a meaningful choice. Dalits were now able to vote for themselves.

The issues involved are not all symbolic; politics is not only about moral representations. "Village politics are all about patronage", as Spencer found in Sri Lanka, "about getting government jobs and loans" (1996: 87). Many of the new organisational forms of caste, as Kothari observes, are "oriented to securing economic benefits, jobs, or special concessions" (1997: 68). In this light, voting for a Dalit party could be explained by the hope that this would enable greater access to state resources. It is impossible to dismiss this argument completely because political ties *are* often seen as improving access to tangible resources (Robinson 1988: 259, Alm 1996: 121, de Wit 1996: 24, Vincentnathan 1996: 494). This point of itself, however, cannot account for the numbers of people who turned out to vote. The tangible benefits to be gained are too few for everybody to have access to them. Furthermore, if resources were the main consideration of the voters then it would have been a safer bet for them to support the ruling DMK (cf. Prasad & Bechain, Hindu 04/01/00). The issue of resources, therefore, cannot be divorced from the question of power and representation: who controls the resources, and which candidate is likely to represent one's interests.

"Untouchable identity", as Mosse states, "is not pliable at will. ... The ability to acquire and sustain alternative identities, or to redefine the meaning of symbols of inferiority, depends crucially on having the power and resources to change existing relations of dependence: In short, identity change is caste politics" (Mosse 1996: 2). By refusing to vote as they were told to, by prominently displaying posters of Thirumavalavan and the cycle symbol of the TMC, and by refusing to see themselves as socially subordinate, the Dalits of Chidambaram were explicitly engaging in caste politics. The electoral coalitions in Tamil Nadu are often precarious, with many of the smaller parties keen to ally themselves to the party that is most likely to win. The political isolation of the Tamil Maanila Congress in the wake of another round of coalition building encouraged them to seek alliances elsewhere. For the Dalits, the

DPI leader. With regard to Ezhilmalai, it is ironic that in the 2001 Assembly elections he contested and won on behalf of the AIADMK, and in alliance with the PMK.

creation of a Third Front permitted them to articulate a positive identity that rejected notions of servitude, submission and marginality. For the duration of the election, in fact, the Dalits of this area assumed a position at the centre stage of Tamil politics. The success of the new venture would be gauged by the response that Thirumavalavan received. The assertion of political 'we-ness', however, is predicated upon the identification of an 'other', and when these 'others' feel politically threatened, they may organise a counter movement. Dalit social identities are relational; they are defined *in terms* of other groups and structures, and *in the terms* of other groups and institutions (Charsley 1996: 13). When Dalits decided to take the responsibility for their own political destiny "this caused an 'allergy' amongst the Vanniyars" (Kamaraj, Interview: 10/09/99). In the face of Dalit assertion, which challenged their social, political and symbolic dominance, the Vanniyars determined to reassert what they saw as the 'natural order' (cf. Khare 1984: 15).

BOMBS AND BALLOTS

On statewide television Thirumavalavan broke down into tears. "Thousands of Dalits have lost their homes and goods", he reported, "they stand on the street without even the means to buy milk for their babies" (Kaasi 1999: 31). Those in the hospitals were mostly Dalit, those on the streets due to the destruction of their houses were the same, but so were those in the prisons. The neutrality of the law enforcement authority was questioned once again in Chidambaram. Warned well in advance of possible violence they failed to prevent trouble from flaring, or arrest the perpetrators. In a damning indictment, Independent Initiative insisted that "the police and Poll Officers had overlooked their basic duty to protect the human rights of Dalits including their voting rights. They have either been mute witnesses or active agents in perpetrating atrocities on Dalits" (I.I Report Sept 1999: 20; Kaasi Sept 14; Thamukku Sept-Oct 1999; Junior Viketan 19/09/99). The police, in other words, are accused of *institutionalised casteism*. They are presented as reflecting the prejudices of the castes from which they are drawn. Recent initiatives to introduce officers from other states, and therefore from castes which are not represented in Tamil Nadu, have been very welcome. Problems arise however in the police tendency to act as the "servants of the party in power" (ibid. 21). Regardless of the truth of this statement, the police force has lost the trust of much of the Dalit community. Events such as those that occurred in Nellai, Chidambaram and Melavalavu have painted a picture of a force that is

routinely anti-Dalit (cf. Ghosh, *The Hindu* 30/05/99, Viswanathan 1997: 111, Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998: 139). The main issue here is the critical lack of resources and power.

That the Vanniyars in Chidambaram resisted change should be no surprise. Had the Third Front merely threatened the hegemony of the (AIA)DMK, its supporters would have had to face the resentment of party loyalists. In Chidambaram, however, the issue was further polarised by caste.¹⁶ The Independent Initiative report lent credence to allegations of intimidation and violence by the established parties, it also found that the DMK and AIADMK candidates far outspent the TMC candidates, and well exceeded the upper limit of 15 lakhs stipulated by the Election Commission. Their team was also warned, well ahead of the elections, that there “was a threat of the Dalits not being able to cast their votes” (Ibid. 3). Before independence, Dr Ambedkar warned about the difficulties of a ‘new life of contradictions’. “In politics”, he cautioned, “we will be recognising the principle of one man, one vote, one value. In our social and economic life we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man, one value” (in Joshi 1986: 40). In Chidambaram the field of play was certainly skewed in favour of the dominant castes. In this instance the dominant castes can be said to be the Backward Caste Vanniyars who are the most populous caste, and whose interests are most directly threatened by the Dalit assertion.

BACKWARD CASTES/DOMINANT GROUPS

Dalits in Tamil Nadu are marginalised physically as well as socially as we saw in chapter five. The caste-based segregation renders issues of identification unproblematic, and reinforces the group feelings that are then tapped by political party machines. Discriminatory practices are largely receding today but Dalits are still dependent on the *oor* for rations, medical assistance, and other amenities (cf. Ghosh 1999). This institutionalised inequality has often given the upper castes the means of enforcing their domination. In Chidambaram, the spirit - if not the law - of democratic

¹⁶ Kannagusabhai, a WPM activist from the neighbouring constituency of Myaladuthurai, insisted that the PMK was a casteist outfit. “They do not want to see us as humans”, he said, “and no matter what we have done they have not looked on us as humans” (Interview 29/09/99). Ezhilmalai, by this construction, was depicted as a pawn in the hands of the PMK’s political aspirations – utilised so long

elections was violated by the location of polling booths in the main *oors*. Those who defied the threats had to brave the intimidating environment of the upper caste settlement to cast their votes. The Vanniyars did not hesitate to use the imbalance of power in their favour. Drinking water for many Dalit *cheris* was cut off on the day of the election, and supply had not been restored even a week after the event. In many areas, subsequent to the poll, Dalits were subjected to social boycott. They were denied access to much needed amenities, barred from shops and schools, and refused employment by the upper castes (Human Rights Watch Sept 1999, Thamukku Sept-Oct 1999, I.I Report Sept 1999). The DPI and the PMK traded charges about vote-rigging, corruption and the resort to violence, but the problems in Chidambaram were not simply the result of aggressive electoral competition. To present this election as an isolated event would be mistaken, but as an event it has served to highlight the continuing significance of caste prejudices in India today.

Affirmative action programmes for the Scheduled Castes have made them the subjects of envy amongst Backward Caste communities who feel that their position is threatened by the rise of the Dalits. There is widespread resentment about constitutional amendments such as the Protection of Civil Rights Act, and the Prevention of Atrocities Act, which are seen as pandering to the Dalits and open to abuse. The election in Chidambaram, however, highlights the continuing dependency of the Dalits in terms of vital resources. The violence triggered by Dalit mobility has been facilitated by inequalities in 'money and muscle power' (I.I Report Sept 1999). It is a sign of how far Tamil Nadu has come in its attempt to exorcise the 'evil of untouchability', that Dalits were able to contest the election in an independent capacity. In some villages Dalits hit back and asserted their strength, and they were also guilty of electoral malpractice. These trends indicate the rising confidence and political awareness of the community. The government response, in arresting thousands of Dalit youth as a 'preventative measure', and the social boycott imposed by the dominant castes on a more local level, reveal the extent of the prejudice that Dalits still face. The government response may arguably be seen as politically motivated rather than caste-based. Elite groups now in power are perhaps reluctant to extend the boundaries of the political arena, but no political party would openly

as he played the game and towed the party line, he was dropped as soon as he became a political player in his own right.

support the continuing practice of untouchability. As the Dalits establish themselves as an organised political force the emphasis will rather be on trying to co-opt them as electoral allies. This process of re-negotiation was apparent in the run up to the 2001 Assembly elections as we saw in the introduction, but the significance of the politics of identity was apparent in the refusal of DMK cadres to support the Dalit parties in the DMK-led Front (Illangovan 2001).

V: ENTERING THE MAINSTREAM

THE DEMOCRATIC ROAD TO EQUALITY

More pressing, from this perspective, is a means of establishing the humanity of the Dalits for the locally dominant castes. Ghosh calls for the Dalits to be supported financially as well as in terms of education, to help them escape the ties of dependency (Hindu 30/05/99, cf. Khare 1984: 70). Although this recognises the continuing social oppression of the Dalits, it elides the complexity of the situation. Firstly, providing more money for the Dalits is no insurance that it will reach them. The quotas set out by the reservation system have yet to be filled, and the loans that the government does offer seldom reach the intended recipients intact. Secondly, the cumulative deprivation of the community cannot be tackled simply by throwing more money at the problem, since even wealthy and educated Dalits face discrimination. Indeed, in the short term at least this is likely to increase the hostility of the BCs.¹⁷ The provision of reserved seats for the Dalits in local panchayat elections has not proved to be an immediate means of empowerment. "In several places", as Viswanathan notes, "Dalit presidents have not been able to hold meetings, because caste Hindu members would not sit down with them at the meetings" (1997: 114. cf. Chapter 5 above). The Dalit quest for equality involves challenging the authority, status and social dominance of those above them in the caste system. By definition, therefore, the process will involve levels of cultural, symbolic, economic and physical violence. In a 'Fanonesque' understanding such violence is the necessary precursor to a more equal society in which it would be possible for the poor of all castes to unite. The political path is merely one aspect of that struggle, but it is an important one. "For many Dalits", Omvedt opines in her analysis of the 1999 elections, "the election

¹⁷Several conferences of Dalit women in 1999, ended with the demand that Dalit women should be provided with guns as a means of self-defence. Until they can be assured of their security, they argued that no number of welfare programmes could help them attain equality.

process is an end in itself ... In fact, for under-employed rural and urban masses, the election process brings some immediate sources of income" (Hindu 06/11/99). Dalits, she feels, are more concerned about obtaining their 'quota' than articulating a meaningful cultural or economic programme. If this is the case then "no Dalit party can ever emerge as a significant player in Indian politics", as Prasad and Bachain insist. "For no Dalit party can compete with the mainstream parties such as the Congress or the BJP in terms of throwing alms to a 'hungry' Dalit electorate" (Hindu 04/01/00). They reject her assertion and ask how she accounts for the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).¹⁸

The questions raised in both these articles are vital to an understanding of Dalit politics in Tamil Nadu. An analysis on the basis of resources alone cannot, as we have seen, account for the numbers of people who turned out to vote for the TMC initiative in 1999. Dr Krishnasamy of the Puthiya Tamilagam suggested that his party could link up with the Liberation Panthers on issues concerning the community as a whole. "The reasoning was that Dalit leaders should retain the leadership of Dalit campaigns ... and that mainstream political parties should not derive undue political mileage from the struggles of Dalits against caste oppression" (Nambath, Hindu 14/11/99). The offer was rejected and, subsequent to the elections, the TMC and the DPI secured an electoral understanding with the AIADMK. This represented a pragmatic recognition that the Dravidian parties remain hegemonic forces in the state. The results of three bye-election results in early 2000 suggest that the political benefits of such a move are far from clear cut. In these contests the "DMK gained from Dalits' apathy to the AIADMK" (Hindu 29/02/00). Contrary to the depiction of Dalits as pawns to manipulated by political parties, or their own leaders, the Dalit electorate refused to endorse a political party that they regard as ideologically opposed to them. In the months preceding the 1999 election Thirumavalavan had repeatedly articulated the movement's opposition to the AIADMK, and insisted that the atrocities committed under its rule could not be forgiven. More recently, on the 5th of March

¹⁸ The Bahujan Samaj Party was formed in 1984 by Kanshi Ram a Dalit activist from Punjab. The BSP claims to represent the interests of the 90% of Indians who are disenfranchised (the *bahujan samaj* or 'masses'/common people), but its appeal is "far more caste based than class oriented" (Duncan 1999: 36). The politics of the BSP is uncomplicated – seeking power at any cost in order to secure social change. Initially based in Maharashtra the party has established itself across the Hindi heartland and won the Chief Ministership of Uttar Pradesh in 1995. See Duncan (1999) for a detailed look at the BSPs politics. Corbridge and Harriss (2000: 214-5) provide a brief summary of its rise and history.

2001, the DPI joined the DMK-led National Democratic Alliance (including the BJP) for the Assembly elections. They abandoned the AIADMK's 'secular' Front because it allied itself with the PMK (Venkatesh, Hindu 06/03/01). There are powerful political compulsions that make coalitions with established parties attractive. If the Dalit movements are not to be cast as short-term opportunists who are using their members to further their own interests, however, an alteration in strategy is perhaps called for.

'We must be with the people', Thirumavalavan insisted, but "for the organised Dalits, the absence of an identifiably pro-Dalit front took away much of the interest in the bye-election" in 2000 (Nambath, Hindu 29/02/00). The election in Chidambaram was about more than political machination, and the struggle for political resources. When the Dalit parties campaigned for a 'share of power' they encapsulated the rising political awareness of the Dalit community. Whilst immediate political considerations may require opportunist electoral alliances, Dalit movements cannot afford to ignore the opinions of their constituents. Having campaigned and voted for a 'share of power' the Dalit electorate may not be prepared to prop up alternate Dravidian parties. In this light, the 1999 Lok Sabha Elections may truly prove to be a turning point in Tamil politics. Sakthidasan is from a remote village in Chidambaram constituency. He spoke of the necessity of entering the political process as the only means by which Dalit leaders could gain more 'respect, attention, and power'. The people in this constituency are dependent on other castes for work as agricultural labourers, except for the few that have gained low-grade government jobs. When asked how much faith he had in democracy Sakthidasan was forthright. "We do not have that much faith in democracy, but for the first time a Dalit has stood as a Dalit and we have done our duty by voting for him. Whether he does anything for us or not is the next question, but our votes are for ourselves" (Interview 26/09/99). The defining feature of these elections was the prospect of a real alternative to the established parties. The presence of an independent Dalit candidate persuaded many people to vote for the first time and expanded the base of democratic participation. In the concluding chapter I will argue that this gradual process of democratisation is the most important outcome of the Dalit struggle.

CONCLUSION

Caste and Citizenship

*Chorus: A new dawn will certainly arise
But only you can achieve that
The exorbitant demands of the dominant castes
Will be buried in mud on that day*

*Take responsibility to take on and destroy
Those wolves who promise us equality
To ensure that equality can bloom in this land
Support the cycle with your vote!*

*The rich have risen on the backs of their neighbours
Start pulling them off the ladder
To ensure that all can have a life in this country
Support the cycle with your vote!*

*Raise up a flood of the people in order
To abolish the communal scriptures
To establish a new world at this election
Support the cycle with your vote!*

*Set out with purpose and resolve to
Ensure the victory of Moopanar's Front
To make Thirumavalavan's victory your own
Support the cycle with your vote!*

(Liberation Panther song for the 1999 election – Trans. Self)

CONCLUSION: CRITICAL CITIZENS

The DPI and Democratisation in India

I: CREATING CITIZENS: DALIT MOVEMENTS AND DEMOCRACY

UNITY IN DIVERSITY: SCHEDULED CASTES & DALIT MOVEMENTS

The 30th of June 1999 marked the 2nd anniversary of the Melavalavu massacre, and security around the *cheri* was tight. On the road leading out of Madurai some twenty miles away, check points had been set up and only those vehicles that had the necessary permits were allowed through. The open square of the colony, where the seven ‘martyrs’ of the massacre are buried, was transformed beyond recognition. Coconut matting walls had been erected to create an outdoor hall sufficiently large to shelter over a thousand people seated cross-legged on the ground. The area was divided into three main sections: in the first section lay the graves of the fallen, covered in flowers and with a photo of each person serving as a tombstone. The main body of the ‘hall’ was an empty space where activists and onlookers could sit in the shade. Their attention was directed towards the third part of the hall where a raised dais was equipped with seats and microphones for Dalit movement leaders. Over the course of the day, Dalit leaders from most movements and parties in Tamil Nadu made the pilgrimage to Melavalavu to address the crowds. Safety fears meant that a strict time schedule was enforced. Each group arrived in convoy; the leaders paid their respects to the dead, mounted the stage to make their speeches, and then drove off before the next contingent arrived. Most of the audience remained constant through the day, but each successive leader brought his own entourage, packed into vans, sitting on the roofs of buses and jeeps, and jammed into auto-rickshaws. Each vehicle displayed the flag of the movement or party that they owed their allegiance to. The leaders came and went in swift succession sometimes crossing paths, but mostly kept apart by the police operation. The message delivered by each leader was specific and each one had a different emphasis, and yet they all chose to be present on this occasion and they all returned to similar themes and issues. Murugesan has been established as a martyr of the *Dalit* struggle in Tamil Nadu, and his memory serves as a powerful unifying force in an otherwise disparate movement.

The Dalit movements in Tamilnadu, as we have seen, are riven by the factionalism, personalism, contradictions and particularism that characterise many political parties

in India. This should not be surprising given that social movements are always shaped by the political, economic and social context from which they emerge, even as they attempt to alter certain aspects of that world. Despite the divisions that have precluded the emergence of a coherent *Dalit Movement*, it would be inaccurate to say that there is no sense of Dalit unity. Although the focus in this thesis has been the organisation and activists of the Liberation Panthers the implications of this research have a broader relevance. The aspects that unite the various Dalit movements are reflected precisely in the very term *Dalit*. The fact that we can talk about Dalit, as distinct from caste or class, movements serves to emphasise certain distinctive characteristics of the Dalit struggle. The diverse movements respond to similar conditions and adopt strategies that conform to an established repertoire of action. Social movement activity, as Zashin observes, is usually constrained by a number of self-limitations “such as not resisting arrest, informing local authorities of demonstration plans beforehand, and refusing to respond violently to physical attacks” (1972: 105). In Chapter Eight I showed how social movements tend to follow a pattern of limited innovation that does not deviate too far from recognised forms of action. Even the resort to violence – such as burning buses and blocking roads – is usually confined to certain forms and targets that echo past histories of protest.

SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENTS

Apart from the convergence of means, Dalit movements are also united in their pursuit of similar issues and objectives. Broadly speaking their demands can be summarised under four headings: The demand for self-esteem, for a share of resources, for human rights and for meaningful political participation. Obviously these demands are often interdependent and the denial of one of the above can preclude the attainment of the others. These demands are detailed elsewhere, especially in the introduction, so I shall only present a brief summary here. The focus instead will be on the implications of these objectives. Self-esteem is perhaps the most difficult to define of the movements’ goals. In the context of this study the concept refers to group rather than individual identity and indicates that the Dalit desire to be treated as equals is partly dependent upon, and must coincide with, their own efforts and self-belief. The problem is that “stigma threatens the person stigmatised...” as S. M. Miller notes. “The stigmatised person experiences the fact of being separated from the rest of society, of being treated as someone different, marginalized, as less than

others, as not worthy of everyday exchanges and transactions that make up the community. This experience produces a 'spoilt identity', a self-image which is damaged and diminished impeding the autonomous actions of the individual" (in Twine 1994: 97).¹

The oppressed, in other words, are not completely free of the hegemonic worldview and they can consequently see themselves as lesser beings (Goffman 1970: 17 – See also thesis chapter 3).² They may not perceive their subordination as just, or accept the *basis* of their lowly status, but they can come to see themselves as powerless. This diminishes the subject's capacity for meaningful action and renders them dependent on others. In the demand for self-esteem, the Dalit movements challenge this 'culture of victimhood' and assert that the Dalits are capable of becoming 'sovereigns' (G. Dietrich, personal communication). Sovereignty here entails the assumption of responsibility for one's own life and the assertion that the Dalits are equal citizens in every sense. Key to this demand is the inversion of past stigmas, and the conscious revival of previously denigrated names, arts and customs. Given the subordinate position assigned to untouchables in Hindu society, the recognition of Dalits as equal citizens will require an alteration in socio-cultural practices as well as political procedure.

Self-esteem and belief are not disembodied attributes. Inequality curtails the options open to the poor, thereby limiting their access to socio-political rights and choice. This reduction of opportunity can heighten feelings of powerlessness and inability, thus lowering self-esteem. Citizens, therefore, require social resources such as health and education not only to participate in the 'modern' economy, but also to participate effectively in the democratic decision making that can further their own and other peoples life projects (Marshall 1983: 249, Twine 1994: 105, Dreze & Sen 1997: ix). In highly stratified societies, such as India, access to social resources is often

¹ Although Goffman was the first sociologist to systematically deal with the concept of 'stigma', his seminal work is mostly concerned with the social rather than the psychological effects of being stigmatised (1970 (1963)). 'Stigma', according to Goffman, refers to "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance" (ibid: 9).

² Goffman makes a similar point when he asserts that stigmatized individuals share the norms of the 'normal' people in the society that they live in. "The stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we do; this is a pivotal fact" (1970: 17). On being made to feel different or 'other', "shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual's perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess" (ibid. 18).

dependent upon prior access to material wealth and political strength. Dalits living in *cheris* and slums, as we have seen, frequently complain of poverty, and of being denied their basic rights. Where people are concerned about their next meal they are less likely to demand the education, government benefits and social respect that are their due. In villages around Karur, as shown in chapter four, Dalits continue to accept overt forms of subordination (such as the two-glass system) because they are dependent upon the upper castes for work. In such circumstances they are denied access to their rights as citizens.

The possibility of commuting into the city of Madurai, however, enabled the villagers of Kodankipatti and Vadipatti to reject the traditional caste work that they used to perform. When combined with the fact that the emerging Dalit middle class forms the resource base for much movement action, it is clear that some redistribution of resources is a pre-requisite for meaningful citizenship (Marshall 1950: 249). Whilst Dalits are hindered from finding gainful employment and receiving equal treatment by caste considerations, politics will continue to be informed by the discourse of caste identity (Duncan 1999: 55, Jenkins 1999: 201). Reservations have helped to de-link caste and occupation, but whilst landlessness and poverty correlate highly with low-caste status, social boycotts and other forms of economic coercion serve to delimit the scope of democratic reform. Democracy, in other words, is as much about *social* practice as political systems. The culture of victimhood is perpetuated in conditions of inequality, especially where the paucity of resources coincides with human rights abuses. The extreme vulnerability of the Dalits in villages was highlighted in Kodankipatti when the *cheri* was ransacked and the Dalits were forced to flee.

DALIT RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

The 'Rights of Man', according to Lefort, "mark a disentangling of right and power" (1988: 31). In an Indian context, Sethi notes that the diffusion of the language and consciousness of rights throughout society means that social relations are no longer "governed primarily via custom, tradition and obligation" (1998: 414). Dalit movements may thus be seen as the heirs of the Enlightenment as much as the product of local conflicts. Social movements are often presented as the vanguard in a democratic revolution seeking liberty, equality and autonomy for all sections in society (Omvedt 1994: 16, Haynes 1997: 5, and Sethi 1998: 409). It is certainly

impossible to ignore the diverse strands of Dalit activism that extend beyond the local area. The importance of international trends and links is obvious in the names and strategies of the Liberation Panthers as much as in the language of human rights that they adopt. "We must", however, "also recognise that even as power resistance can be 'global', victimage entailed in the violation of human rights ... is uniquely individual; for, power inscribes itself on the body, mind and spirit of individual human beings" (Baxi 1998: 336).

To depict the suffering and struggles of the Tamil Dalits, as merely the extension of a universal project does not do justice to the individuals concerned. The promises of the constitution ring hollow whilst untouchability continues to exist. In his criticism of Marx, Lefort insists that the rights of man are not simply formulaic: "they both testify to the existence of a new network of human relations and *bring it into existence*" (1988: 32, emphasis added). Yet rights do not simply filter into social practice of their own accord; they have to be claimed, fought for and defended. Whilst Lefort points out that the state is not a highly cohesive formation that is totally opposed to the spread of human rights, it is not totally committed to them either. Nor is the state divorced from a society that continues to operate along caste lines and reflect a diversity of unequal interests (Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 168/9, Chandhoke 2001: 10, Jeffrey 2000: 1019). In this context the DPI's demand for human rights places them within a wider historical struggle, but also at the forefront of a specific struggle for social justice and against discrimination. Human rights, it is asserted, are not expendable in the quest for stability, economic growth or development. In this sense, in the words of Norris et al. (1999), the Liberation Panthers constitute a step towards a more 'critical citizenry', and a culture of questioning rather than passive acceptance.

II: DEMOCRACY, DISCONTENT & DIRECT EXPANDING POLITICAL HORIZONS

"Critical citizens", according to Norris, "are dissatisfied with established authorities and traditional hierarchical institutions, ... feel that existing channels for participation fall short of democratic ideals, and ... want to improve and reform the institutional mechanism of representative democracy" (1999: 27). Dalit activists conform to this definition. Like the 'civil disobedients' of Zashin's (1972) study, they begin by addressing people's immediate grievances at ground level rather than immediately

seeking to seize power in order to implement their prior ideological objectives. Unlike revolutionary groups they do not seek to destroy the structures of state power, and they often see the state as an ally in the struggle against oppressive elements within civil society (Corbridge & Harriss 2000: 208, Chandhoke 2001: 15). The demand for basic human rights is insufficient to offset the power of other groups in society, since the provision of such rights can, and often does, leave the edifice of structural inequality largely intact. The independent state of India supposedly guarantees political rights to all of its citizens but such rights have no meaning in a society that tolerates social and economic inequality, as Marx observed. Confidence in, and broad agreement about, political processes and institutions, as Newton (1999: 171) notes, does not necessarily correlate with high levels of *social* trust. The electorate of Melavalavu *panchayat* did not challenge the political process, it will be recalled, but the Backward Castes were not prepared to let an untouchable represent them.

“Equality of status”, as Marshall averred, “is more important than equality of income” (1983: 258). Those who have been accustomed to dominance cannot easily countenance the equality of those below them. It is arguable that the formation of caste-based movements and the support of radical leaders can only exacerbate this social antipathy and mistrust. Inglehart shows that social insecurity often “leads to a need for strong authority figures to protect one from threatening forces, and breeds an intolerance of cultural change, and of different ethnic groups” (1999: 242). This position ignores the fact that it is often marginal groups who organise in such fashion. Where identity based mobilisation is aimed at increasing the political participation of hitherto excluded citizens it may result in major institutional reforms that strengthen democracy rather than weaken it. Civil disobedience is, as Zashin (1972: 1) insists, the last resort of “basically *allegiant*” citizens.

POPULISM AND PROTEST

Contrary to Narendra Subramanian (1999) it has been argued that the Dravidian parties have failed to create an open, democratic and plural society, and that the proliferation of Dalit and other caste parties is, in part, an attempt to extend the scope of Tamil politics. It is argued that the egalitarian emphasis of Dravidian rhetoric has not translated into social practice and that the incorporation of Dalits into a system of state patronage does not equate to an extension of democratic participation. T.

Subramanian of *Frontline* highlights how ironic it is “that such a large number of caste parties should sprout in Tamil Nadu, the cradle of the Dravidian movement” (March 2, 2001). But it is precisely because the interests of excluded social groups were not served by established politics, that they have mobilised for a share of political power.

The history of ethnic mobilisation in Tamil Nadu, according to Subramanian (1999), shows how an active citizenry and a flexible leadership can promote a more tolerant and pluralist democracy. He proceeds to favourably compare Dravidian ideologies to the inflexibility of Hindu nationalism. “*The emergence of organizational pluralism within influential political organizations alone*”, according to Subramanian, “*explains the emergence and maintenance of social pluralism*” (1999: 38 emphasis in original). In the context of Subramanian’s other findings this is a puzzling conclusion, especially since, as Jenkins (1995: 19) highlights, it is a critique of plural democracy that social groups gain access to the political process by resorting to extra-institutional action rather than peaceful compromise. An analysis of the DPI has served to reflect Subramanian’s later assertion that “popular mobilisation is far more likely to reinforce pluralism than the irresolute actions of governments” (1999: 327). In this sense, the study may be read as a qualified extension of Subramanian’s work into the 1990s when the dominance of the Dravidian parties has come under challenge from hitherto excluded groups. But, as Harriss observes, the assertion that protest mobilisation shaped the emerging Dravidian polity, “contradicts the notion that ‘organisational pluralism’ within political institutions explains the *emergence* of ‘social pluralism’” (2000: 78).

PROTEST AND POLITICAL PLURALISM

Subramanian highlights the limitations of the Dravidian Parties in terms of land reforms, and the predominantly backward caste constituency that they draw upon and yet he recurrently insists upon the pluralist nature of politics in Tamil Nadu. Speaking of other ethnic groups and of reformist communist parties he critiques the limited nature of their internal pluralism (1999: 81). From the perspective of countless Dalit, Muslim and Most Backward Caste citizens, however, it is clear that the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (Dravidian Progressive Federation – DMK) and the AIADMK (All India Anna DMK) may also be described in terms of ‘bounded internal

pluralism'. As Ravichandran, the Director of the Village Development Society, put it: "Those who fought so hard to overthrow the domination of Brahmins have taken on board the caste structures in their own turn. It is the middle caste people who have most land ... that is why they have to accept the caste system – to ensure that owners remain owners, that slaves remain slaves, and untouchables remain untouchable" (Interview: 27/09/99).

Chandhoke also questions whether the Dravidian Parties have "managed to inculcate a democratic spirit among their followers" (Hindu 07/03/99). Given the propensity of AIADMK figures to prostrate themselves before the leader, not only is the 'cadre autonomy' of these institutions open to question, but – when Communist and Scheduled caste associations are suppressed but Backward Caste groups are accommodated – so also is their commitment to pluralism (cf. Chandhoke *ibid.*). Organisational pluralism, in other words, may be a necessary condition for tolerance and stability, but it is not sufficient. The prospects for tolerance and democracy in Tamil Nadu rather hinge on the acceptance of '*mobilisational*' rather than organisational pluralism. It is by organising and protesting outside the mainstream political institutions that the Liberation Panthers and others have entered the political process in the state. "There must", therefore, to emphasise an unstressed conclusion of Subramanian's study, "be scope for mobilization inspired by a wide range of visions to ensure that democratic institutions are sustained" (1999: 80). Given the caste-based polarisation of Tamil society, and the dependent nature of many Dalits in the state, asserting the need for autonomous and assertive mobilisation is far from being a 'platitude' (Harriss 2000: 78).

BEYOND FORMAL DEMOCRACY

It thus seems fair to agree with Norris (1999: 27) that the proliferation of extra-institutional mobilisation could point to the evolution of channels of political participation rather than their decline. Discontent is often a precursor to apathy, as she points out, and the turn to social mobilisation should perhaps be welcomed as a consequence. Democratic regimes have an infrastructure for the incorporation of protest, as Zashin noted, and narrowing this may result in higher levels of instability than the toleration of discontent. Dalit movements have mobilised in order to demand their political rights and a voice in the decision making bodies. Granting them a

meaningful share of political power will enhance the legitimacy and accountability of the state rather than reduce it. Throughout this thesis I have acknowledged that the democratic state in India provides opportunities for Dalit mobility. Political and civil rights, in combination with ambitious affirmative action programmes, have enabled millions of people to ameliorate situations of dependence and subordination. Democratic values now command widespread acceptance in India, and no political party can openly endorse the discriminatory practices associated with the caste system. Lefort (1988: 19) describes democracy as the 'dissolution of markers of certainty', but to be effective it is clear that a democratic society must constitute new points of reference. It is a pre-requisite of meaningful democracy that the state is impartial, independent of vested interests, and that civil liberties and constitutional rights are upheld. India, as is commonly stated, *is* the world's largest democracy, and not only in a formal Schumpeterian sense of the term. India is more than "a polity that permits the choice between elites by citizens voting in regular and competitive elections" (Karl 1990: 1). Indian citizens are also accorded various civil liberties and the rights to mobilise, organise, protest and campaign freely – which means that they are able to express and experiment with ideas. What these rights are unable to provide is a level playing field for the articulation of contending programmes. "Nowhere", as Mugenyi observes, "has democracy produced equality" (1988: 189). Equality of opportunity and equality before the law fail to legislate for the heightened disparity of wealth and power in India.

Citizenship, as Marshall (1983: 249) insisted, consists of three inter-related elements: civil, political *and* social rights. The reservation system attempts to tackle the issues of social rights but the impact of such programmes, whilst meaningful, has been limited. Stipulating that democratic societies should preside over "socio-economic advances for the majority of the population", in Karl's view, is an ideal that has not been achieved in any democratic country (1990: 2). Without reforming the structures of social and economic power, however, the rich are able to influence electoral outcomes disproportionately through media monopolies, social boycotts, and the manipulation of marred voting customs (such as offering money and patronage to potential voters). If marginalised groups are to play a meaningful role in democratic politics, electoral legislation and practices need to be improved. Ballot boxes, for instance, should be located in neutral, not higher-caste, areas. Basic services, which

are essential to the survival of the poor, must also become rights rather than the largesse of a patrimonial state that can hold out the prospect of patronage to its supporters (Malloy 1987: 249, Castañeda 1993: 337). Democratising Democracy, in other words, must devolve power away from the elites and redress deep-rooted social inequalities. Democracy “without bread, freedom of speech and assembly, of association, ... of political participation”, as Baxi points out, “... may be existentially meaningless for its victims” (in Ambrose 1995: 115).

CITIZENSHIP & SOCIAL CASTE

The disenfranchised Dalits of Chidambaram were not only denied their right to vote, they were subject to a social boycott that deprived them of water, work and social amenities such as education. In Myaladuthurai district I attempted to question the validity and utility of violent protest: “In this democratic country...” I began. “There is no democracy”, Somandam of the Working Peasant’s Movement interjected, “Tamil Nadu is not a democratic country” (interview 28/09/99). When people are not allowed to vote for the candidate of their choice, denied access to certain jobs (and are over-represented in unskilled and low paid employment), and barred from certain residential areas, because of their caste status - the efficacy of the liberal democratic state is called into question. When the same people are threatened and told not to vote for certain candidates and see most politicians as corrupt and unrepresentative – then its legitimacy is in doubt. Barrington Moore (1966: 354) suggested that liberal democracy was hindering the revolutionary break with the past that India required for economic and social modernisation.³ Meaningful social change *has* occurred where state regimes have pursued more proactive politics that emphasised democratic rights over civil liberties. The latter, as Baxi (1998: 338) notes, generally impose restrictions on state power, whereas the former requires the state to implement affirmative policies that empower the people. Democratic rights go beyond the contested reservation of posts and places for various communities, and embrace more basic demands – such as delivery of land reform, literacy skills and primary health care (Marshall 1983: 249, Twine 1994: 105).

³ Numerous other authors have likewise observed that the liberal state has not challenged the dominance of the main proprietary classes in the country (Kohli 1987, Bardhan 1988, Vanaik 1990, Eswaran & Kotwal 1997, Haynes 1997, Randall 1997, Jenkins 1999, Subramanian 1999, Corbridge & Harriss 2000, Jeffrey 2000).

Given the inadequacy of liberal democracy to meet these demands it is hardly surprising that alienated groups resort to direct action. In fact such action could be seen as the inevitable disjunction between the promises of the constitution (given an airing at each election by ambitious politicians), and the reality on the ground. But it is, as Jenkins argues, “a critique of classical pluralism that challengers secure gains and enter political representative systems through unruliness rather than peaceful compromise” (1995: 19). Social movements play a dual role with regard to the state: “One role involves constantly exposing the class character, the caste, racial and patriarchal character of the state and seeking to overthrow or replace it. ... The other role of the movements is to steadily reform it by forcing it to implement its own promises” (Mohanty 1998: 75). Dalit movements thus perform the seemingly contradictory acts of denouncing the political process as illegitimate and corrupt even as they call upon it to enforce the law and lobby police officers and politicians on particular issues. By extending support to political parties, or forging alliances with them, these movements seek to place their demands on the political agenda. It is when these institutions of interest mediation fail that movements resort to protest of an extra-institutional nature. We can, therefore, echo Grzybowski’s (1990) conclusion that social movements are not necessarily antagonistic to liberal democracy, but are “striving to bring about the conditions in which meaningful political democracy can exist” (in Cammack 1994: 189, see also Dalton et al. 1990: 3, Subramanian 1999: 80).

III: CHALLENGING CODES: CASTE IN DEMOCRATIC INDIA CONTESTING POWER

The DPI can no longer be described as ‘anti-hegemonic’ in the sense that its objectives are enshrined in the constitution, and it is fighting to ensure that the statutes are properly implemented. The continuing oppression of the Dalit community, however, shows that whilst the law is a critical means of establishing and reinforcing hegemony, it is by no means the only source of dominance. “Hegemony refers to power that ‘naturalises’ a social order, an institution, or even everyday practice so that ‘how things are’ seems inevitable and not the consequence of particular historical actors, classes and events” (Hirsch & Lazarus-Black 1994: 7). Whilst the Constitution of Independent India constituted a challenge to the hegemony of caste structures and ways of living, this challenge has not uniformly informed everyday practice. “The social distribution of knowledge”, as Stuart Hall insists, “is skewed. Ruling or

dominant conceptions of the world do not prescribe the mental content of dominated classes, but the circle of dominant ideas does accumulate the symbolic power to map or classify the world for others; its classifications do acquire not only the constraining power of dominance over other modes of thought, but also the inertial authority of habit and instinct” (1988: 44). When two competing discourses of dominance collide it would be unrealistic to expect the habits and instincts of the existing system to dissipate overnight.

Caste operates both on the level of the state, and that of civil society, and it must be contested on both levels.⁴ The legal prohibition of untouchability, therefore, has not easily translated into everyday practice. What it has succeeded in doing is to render the prevailing hegemony transparent. The DPI today draws upon the legitimising documents of the state to assert their equality and their rights. This is not to say that the Untouchables lived in perfect harmony with the caste system before they were provided with conceptual tools from the West. “The concept of hegemony”, as Scott notes, often “ignores the extent to which a subordinate class can, on the basis of daily experience, penetrate and demystify the ruling ideology” (1985: 317). There is inevitably an element of constructivism in attempts to reconstruct historical critiques of a dominant system, and it is hard to assess how widespread particular views and opinions were. As argued in Chapter Three, however, the pan-Indian evidence of Untouchable myths of origin, and *Bhakti* traditions that questioned the basis of their subordination, point to the fact that ‘the view from the bottom’ has rarely been a simple reflection of the view from above. “When we are cut”, the simplest formulation of this critique enquires, “do we not bleed? And is our blood not as red as yours?”

CASTE TODAY

The Dalits in this study still perceive themselves to be oppressed on the basis of caste, and they organise on the basis of that identity to struggle for equality and citizenship. “Hegemony, once achieved, must be constantly and ceaselessly renewed, re-enacted” (Hall 1988: 54), but once it is contested it comes to be seen merely as an ideology.

⁴ Civil society, as Chandhoke puts it, “cannot look only to the state, it needs must look inwards, at the power centres within its domain, which may be in complicity with the state, and battle them” (2001: 21).

Deprived of the moral force of social acceptability, those who profit from such ideologies come to rely upon coercion and force to retain their dominance. As Dalits have increasingly challenged their social, political and economic exclusion, therefore, the higher-castes have increasingly resorted to repression. Mendelsohn and Vicziany highlight this trend when they distinguish between 'traditional' and 'new' kinds of violence against the Dalits. 'Traditional violence' consists of the repeated rape of Dalit women (especially by their higher caste masters), physical violence, and oppression at the hands of the state or the police, and it mainly arose from the 'utter dependence' of the Dalits on their masters. Contemporary violence against Dalits, by contrast, may be provoked by their claims to equality, "by protective measures, or economic advancement" (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998: 47). Whilst this crude dichotomy is open to question – the Manusmriti, for example, prescribes a catalogue of punishments for the violation of, or resistance to, caste laws – it does serve to highlight the current prevalence of a Higher Caste backlash. Social movement activity, as we have seen, can result in the formation of counter-movements. A pattern is emerging whereby any form of resistance to the dominance of the upper castes is met with 'extravagant revenge' by the upper castes or the state (ibid. 53). Caste violence in Tamil Nadu, according to these authors, is far less than that experienced in neighbouring states, and yet that is not the perception on the ground. Massacres in Cinagarampatti (1997), Melavalavu (1997), and Tirunelveli (1999), and the exaction of revenge in the villages of Gundupatti (1998), Kodankipatti (1999), and Themavvur (2000) as well as in the urban suburbs of Madurai in 1996 all contribute to a sense of threat and fear.

Mendelsohn and Vicziany "suggest that it is precisely the changing character of Untouchable consciousness that lies behind the increased incidence of violence that broke out from the late 1970's" (1998: 76). The current violence in Tamil Nadu lends credence to this position, for it has been the increasing assertion of the Dalits, especially in the last decade that has led to this situation. Despite this real threat, Dalits are increasingly unwilling to accept the status quo and fall into line with the demands of the higher castes.⁵ Across the state they are cognisant of the perils and costs that potentially attend acts of resistance. Unlike the propensity of some theorists

⁵ See Pai (2000) for a similar finding from the northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

to romanticise resistance (see Abu Lughod 1990), Dalits are fully aware that resistance on one level may catch up with them on another. Maintaining their dignity through the refusal to perform degrading jobs, for instance, may lead to a social boycott that deprives them of all forms of employment. Social activists also point out that “contradictory consciousness can exist within individuals or groups” (Haynes & Prakash 1991: 11). Dalit women point to their subordinate status both in the home and in the movement, those living in rural areas point out the relative freedom of their urban counterparts, and different sub-castes are seen to pursue different strategies for survival and some even support the dominant castes.

It is clear that people often resist discrimination from “*inside* the field of power” (ibid. 11). Despite this, Dalit individuals and groups continue to challenge their social oppression and campaign for rights in movements that are at least rhetorically committed to equality for *all*. In December 2000, for instance, two thousand members of the Vanniyar Community “blocked the main streets leading to the Alageeswarar temple, to prevent the proposed march to the temple by Dalits who had been denied entry to the temple for the past several decades” (Hindu 12/12/2000). The gains to be expected from defying this show of force were, for the most part, intangible. Having managed to worship at other shrines for the previous decades it is inconceivable that the temple had suddenly acquired any particular spiritual significance. The temple is not of particular political significance, since it is an obscure shrine in a rural area. Neither was the issue an expression of other local grievances, as can be seen from the insistence of the Dalits in the nearby *cheri*, that “they had been living peacefully with members of the other community in the village all along” (ibid.). The value of the protest, thus, is primarily symbolic. By entering the sacred space of the Hindu temple, the Dalits were not only attempting to actualise the legal rulings that opened up any public temple to all, they were asserting their equality.

CONFOUNDING CULTURAL CODINGS

Their prohibition from entering this space symbolised the fact that they continue to be regarded as ritually impure or untouchable. It also emphasised the dominance of the Vanniyar caste, and their ability to ‘lay down the law’ in the area. The tangible benefits of breaking this convention are virtually non-existent, but it is indicative of the motives of the Dalit movements today. The Liberation Panthers, as we have seen,

are prepared to engage in struggles to assert their common humanity and dignity, and see this as an end in itself (cf. footnote 5). They do not, it is clear, perceive their deprivation in purely material terms. This does not mean that the issue is an immaterial or petty one. The numbers of Vanniyars prepared to flout the law to prevent the march of the Dalits, and the number of Dalits prepared to risk the wrath of the locally dominant caste should testify to that. The Dalits were fully cognisant of the implications of pressing the issue; indeed, on the Saturday (09/12/00), they refused to attend a peace committee meeting because they feared that “the Vanniyas (sic.) were armed with deadly weapons” (ibid.). They will not need to have been reminded of past incidents to know about the costs and dangers of resistance: ostracism, the precipitous demand for debt and interest payments, the denial of employment, the cutting off of essential supplies of water and electricity, open hostility, and potentially violence. A litany of cases in recent years will have weighed on their minds, and yet, despite this, the Dalits were adamant in their demand for entry to the temple. One of the most important aspects of social movement activity, as Swidler indicates, is the “public confounding of existing cultural codings” (1995: 25). Whether by demanding access to public spaces or proudly calling themselves by ‘Untouchable’ caste names, Dalit activists are engaged in such an enterprise. In village after village across India, the Dalits are gaining a consciousness of their rights and of their strength in numbers, and they are refusing to comply with the material and symbolic expressions of their subordination. ‘You want us to clean for you, or play music at festivals? – Then treat us as equals and pay us well. Otherwise you may find yourselves doing the dirty work yourselves’ (composite of interviews with activists). Increasingly even such a statement is seen as too moderate. “A blow for a blow” (*Adi ukku Adi*) is the catchphrase of the DPI, and it exemplifies the determination of the Dalit movements to stand up and be counted as equal citizens and not lesser humans.

IV: RECONFIGURING POLITICS: DALITS & THE POLITICAL PROCESS DEMOCRATISING INSTITUTIONS

In the past few years this determination has fuelled a rise in autonomous Dalit politics. Fed up with being represented by others, and with the lack of a voice in parliament, the Dalit movements are organising politically. There is a sense that extra-institutional protest, whilst vital to raising the issues, is insufficient to obtain political change and the implementation of existing statutes. The advantage of direct action is

that it poses a dramatic reminder of the strength of the movement, and it serves to highlight continuing atrocities and state inaction. The drawback of such an approach is that it permits the state and other communities to brand such movements as criminal elements or militants who need to be suppressed using the full force of the state apparatus. From this perspective the move from social movements to parties reflects a growing concern with the need for political inclusion and recognition. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is understandably an inspiration in this regard, evincing as it does the possibilities of Dalit power in terms of implementing state policies and reservations. The BSP also highlights the problems of political participation, however, in the politics of compromise and alliances that have sometimes led them into alliances with the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. The compromises caused by electoral competition similarly led the DPI and Puthiya Tamilagam into an indirect alliance with the BJP in 2001.

The pitfalls of entry into the political process are highlighted by Price when she suggests that “the potential for subaltern autonomy in Tamil country has been seriously compromised by the participation of subalterns in local institutions of worship and rule” (1996: 5). If Dalit leaders are elected to parliament, as Chandra Bose (TIP) observed, then they are bound to follow its procedures and must forfeit many of the possibilities of radical action. If the rules of the game are skewed in favour of the propertied elites, as the Liberation Panthers maintained during their electoral boycott, then adhering to those rules cannot eliminate structural inequalities, and may serve to grant them added legitimacy. If, on the contrary, parliamentary politics is responsive to pressure then contesting the elections may be the best means of effecting reform. The example of the BSP and other state governments in India suggests that a regime with a strong ideological and organisational basis is capable of effecting meaningful social change (Kohli 1987: 11).

DALIT POLITICS AND DALIT POWER

Arguably the presence of autonomous Dalit movements in parliament will make that institution more accountable and representative, especially as the Dalit leaders have a more direct relationship with their followers. “India’s institutions are not only the bedrock of its democracy, providing an ordered process for the politicisation of previously marginalised groups”, as Jenkins points out, “but also ... the means by

which democracy's change-resistant tendencies are overcome" (1999: 224, cf. Putnam 1993: 8). Also, as the DPI found, the majority of the Dalits still place their faith in the democratic process and – if only for reasons of patronage – they wish to see their leaders in power. Despite this it is clear that the achievements to be obtained through the mere fact of political participation are limited. Other political parties can, and do, pursue objectives that are antithetical to those of the Dalit movement and, unless there is a move towards dialogue, democracy can result in the institutionalisation of deep-rooted opposition. Such a situation renders elections a time for the vociferous, and often violent, expression of these differences. The conflict between the PMK and the DPI appears to be developing along these lines. The Panthers are so opposed to the Vanniyar party that they quit the 'secular front' led by the AIADMK in 2001 in order to join the DMK coalition that had hitherto been described as their worst enemy. They have subsequently threatened to desert that Front in turn if the PMK is readmitted to the fold.

Whilst parties continue to engage in virulent forms of identity politics - premised as much on the vilification of others as the aspiration for a better society – the institutions revitalised by the entry of new political actors are as likely to serve narrow, particularist interests as any other (Jenkins 1999: 229, Pai 2001: 645). The DPI frequently condemned the PMK and the BJP for these failings, but unless they moderate their rhetoric to make it more inclusive they are liable to repeat the same mistakes. The 2002 split in the Liberation Panthers highlights the difficulty of entering the political process, but whilst closed or exclusive groups may forge strong internal bonds of trust and solidarity, they foster distrust among other groups in society.⁶ Hence, the significance of the DPI's determination to avoid labelling as a caste movement. Whereas caste based associations can pursue their individual interests in the market or within civil society, "political participation forces people, however imperfectly, to deliberate on the public interest" and take the views of others into account (Twine 1994: 91). This is certainly true for minority groups who cannot hope to gain electoral success without reaching out to other members of society. Given that larger social groupings often form electoral majorities it is counter

⁶ On this point see also: Della Porta & Diani (1999: 106), Newton (1999: 171), Blomkvist & Swain (2001: 641), Chandhoke 2001: 17).

productive for the oppressed to persist in the rhetoric of exclusion beyond the mobilisation phase.

V: DEMOCRATIZING DEMOCRACY: CIVIL SOCIETY & THE STATE

CONSTRUCTING CIVIL SOCIETY

As Lefort (1988: 17) indicates, the institutionalisation of opposition within democratic systems forces parties to address the concerns of others. He fails to note that the compromises engendered by the requirement to forge alliances means that there is often a difference between the programmes put forward in opposition and those carried out in practice. It is vital, therefore, that the political process remains accountable and responsive to groups within civil society. Yet accountability of itself, as Dunn (1999: 332) notes, cannot eliminate or even deal with all the hazards that the ruled are subjected to by their rulers. It is possible, for example, for legal behaviour to be morally abject. To be an effective curb on the excesses of power, groups within civil society must be capable of applying pressure on the institutions of interest mediation (Haynes 1997: 171, Sen 1997: 28). India's political system and free press, according to Dreze and Sen (1995: 87), would have made a terrible famine, such as occurred in China, inconceivable. This assertion is premised on the provision of mechanisms that enable the citizens to acquire information and advance their arguments forcefully (Parry & Moran 1994: 4). Pressure is also required to bring contentious legislation, such as the land reform acts, into effect (Bandyopadhyaya 1998: 308).

The achievements of the government in Kerala, it is argued, "have been possible because the poor are well organised and vocal" (Haynes 1997: 123). It should be noted that Kerala is an exception within India. A diversity of groups and interests in society is commonly said to be the marker of a healthy civil society. Although the diversity of Hinduism contributed to social pluralism in Indian society, the dispersal of power "was far from egalitarian. Local communities were microcosms of oppression especially for women and untouchables (Randall 1997: 205). Indeed, as Price (1996: 132-3) shows, civil society was absent in pre-colonial India since the inter-penetration of state and society in interdependent groups precluded the development of a 'public'. "Equality", as Putnam states, "is an essential feature of the civic community" (1993: 105). Whilst legislative and structural changes have altered

the conditions that pertained in 'traditional' India, people's movements have been at the forefront of the construction of an active and effective civil society in which different interest groups can articulate their demands and struggle against oppression.

Civil Society may be described as "the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks – formed for the sake of family, faith, interests and ideology – that fill this space" (Walzer in Potter 1997: 4). It is distinct from the state although institutions such as political parties, which conform to the definition above, serve to bridge the gap between the two. The boundaries between state and civil society are also blurred by the fact that the state is involved in the production of everyday life (Potter 1997: 4). Some theorists draw a distinction between *civil* and *political* society with the latter referring to "that arena in which the polity specifically arranges itself for political contestation to gain control over public power and the state apparatus" (Stepan in Haynes 1997: 17). Despite the analytical utility of the distinction, to ignore the interrelated nature of the two spheres is to downplay the political significance of social action: the fact that the personal often is political. Aid agencies which insist that institutions in civil society must be autonomous of their political counterparts, can end up severing the links between movements and parties. This can lead to the formation of exclusive identities that jeopardise the development of a healthy political society (Jenkins 1999: 213-6, Blomkvist & Swain 2001: 641, Pai 2001: 652).

Without the connections and potential avenues to power one can end up with a "two-tier civil society, with the representative groups of existing or prospective elites inhabiting the top tier and the organisations of the subordinate and marginalised located in the second, lower tier" (Haynes 1997: 174). Many definitions of civil society also question the inclusion of associations that cohere around particularist, especially ethnic, identities (Randall 1997: 207). These are said to weaken social cohesion. Pinkney (1993: 154) contends that democracy is more secure if society comprises a greater diversity of groups, regardless of their constituency, because it encourages tolerance and compromise. Where some groups are more powerful than others, however, diversity cannot prevent the oppression of minorities. In this context social movements based upon particular identities but with inclusive agendas serve to place the demands of, often marginalised, groups onto the national agenda possibly

for the first time (Haynes 1997: 174, Jenkins 1999: 154). In this sense Dalit movements are contributing to the democratisation of India by strengthening civil society and increasing political participation.

CONCLUSION: FROM CASTE TO CITIZENSHIP

“Educate, Agitate, Organise” was Ambedkar’s exhortation, and movements are beginning to reflect these concerns. Common to all the major issues that constitute the basis of the Dalit struggle, is the search for independence and equality: the ability to stand alone, and be accepted as citizens in the modern democratic state. Education is a pre-requisite of such autonomy. To be a responsible and active citizen one needs to be informed and have a capacity for critical thought. Dalit organisations such as the DPI are engaged in consciousness raising, lobbying and pressure tactics in a bid to refashion society, but they are starting to recognise the importance of reforming their own community as well. The DPI, for example, were involved in tuition centres to assist *cheri* and slum children to get on in school. There is a perception of the Dalit community as lazy, irresponsible and lacking in ambition. As we have seen, however, there are fundamental structural inequalities that conspire to perpetuate the conditions of caste stratification and there is also a lack of political will. Countless places reserved for Dalits in colleges allegedly remain vacant due to the antipathy of the other caste communities. The wave of protest that greeted the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990 indicates the immensity of the task ahead and the necessity of educating other communities as well as the Dalits.

Through innumerable protest meetings and demonstrations the diverse strands of the Dalit struggle have attempted to establish their claims in the public sphere. Their antagonists have been the powerful, vested interests of landlords, established political parties, the police, and the upper castes. The picture painted here pits the David of protest movements against the Goliath of the establishment, and yet the situation can not be rendered in such simplistic terms. With regard to women, to caste conflict, to incendiary rhetoric, inter-movement co-operation, and internal democracy, the worst enemy of the Dalit movement has often been the Dalit movement itself. “It is not as if the various movements do not have glaring inadequacies”, as Sethi notes, “they have them in abundance. What is heartening is that they represent a mass stirring against

the cynical manipulation of the people. A new spirit of questioning is slowly entering our normally passive and apathetic society” (1993: 249).

Gaining a place in the institutions of interest mediation is important, but it can only be one aspect of the struggle whilst groups within civil society continue to practise caste-based discrimination. The Liberation Panthers and other Dalit movements have increasingly challenged casteism and questioned traditional structures of authority and ways of being in the world. In doing so they have created the conditions in which the lowest sections of society can make their voices heard and realise their demands. Political analysts, such as Norris (1999: 265), frequently make assertions about the *number* of states that can be characterised as democratic, semi-democratic, or undemocratic. Drawing on these studies they can chart waves of democratisation across the world. Such assertions are immaterial to the people on the ground if democracy is defined merely in easily observed formal political terms. According to Haynes, the work of action groups in the Third World amounts to “a ‘quiet’ revolution” even if it is primarily “defensive in orientation”. People’s movements according to this assessment “are making inroads but are still far from overthrowing the old order of poverty and inequality” (Fischer in Haynes 1997: 39). The title of this thesis was chosen to reflect this current ambiguity. Although the institutions of citizenship are spreading in other words, citizenship cannot coexist with untouchability. Radical changes are necessary and are continually demanded, but the *impact* of the Liberation Panthers *has* been proactive rather than defensive. Democracy is more than just a form of government and the policies that stem from it. It is, as Dewey states, “primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (in Zashin 1972: 55). The shared norms, networks, values, and trust that enable co-ordinated action are referred to as ‘social capital’ (Putnam 1993: 167, Blomkvist & Swain 2001: 639). As noted earlier, however, social capital is not evenly distributed in society, and the ubiquity of civil associations in India have not served to eradicate discrimination on the basis of caste. It is through processes of mobilisation and assertion that the DPI and other Dalit movements have been attempting to establish themselves as equals in a polity of citizens. Their struggle has confronted higher-caste depictions of Dalits as second-class citizens and tried to forge a society in which people of all castes and classes can work together in pursuit of shared objectives. Their entry into mainstream politics reflects their desire for the

equality, security and autonomy that they have been denied for too long. The Dalit struggle, in other words, is not merely concerned with material and political interests. It is a Cultural Revolution.

APPENDIX

*Which is violence? Which is violence?
Which is violence? Which is violence?*

*The hawk which pecks and eats little chicks –
Is it engaging in violence?
Or the chicken which attacks and chases the hawk-
It she engaging in violence?*

*Which is violence? Which is violence?
Which is violence? Which is violence?*

*Is the fact that the huts of the poor still burn -
An indication of violence?
Or are the people who rise up to protest this –
The ones who are really violent?*

*Which is violence? Which is violence?
Which is violence? Which is violence?*

*Is the further oppression of the Downtrodden –
An exercise in violence?
Or is the revolutionary uprising of the people
Against this that is violence?*

*Which is violence? Which is violence?
Which is violence? Which is violence?*

*Beating the people in the name of religion, on the basis of caste
IS violence!
The Panthers who oppose and condemn this
Are NOT a source of violence!*

[Liberation panther Campaign Song 1999: Trans. Self].

APPENDIX A

A Summary of Important Incidents - A Reader's Guide

Although the following events are dealt with extensively at various points in the text, they recur throughout the thesis to exemplify differing points. Here, therefore, I provide a short summary of the main points for easy reference.

Melavalavu: Melavalavu is a small village in central Tamil Nadu, about 20 miles north of Madurai. In 1997 the *panchayat* (or local council) was designated as a seat reserved for a member of the Scheduled Castes. The constituency is mainly populated by the dominant, *Thevar*, Backward Caste. This community was unhappy with the prospect of a Dalit *panchayat* president, and they attempted to disrupt the local elections. Twice they succeeded in postponing the poll. On the first occasion no Dalit could be found to stand for the position due to the high levels of intimidation. When polling went ahead in the second attempt the ballot boxes were seized and the election nullified. Under police protection and guarantees, Murugesan, a DMK member, was elected on the third poll. The higher caste members of the *panchayat* refused to co-operate, and Murugesan was unable to operate from his official office. He set up a '*panchayat-in-exile*' in the Dalit *cheri* instead. For six months he tried to fulfil his office against higher caste opposition. On the 30th of June 1997, he and several followers travelled to Madurai to meet the Collector to discuss the difficulties of the job. On his return the bus in which he was travelling was stopped on the road between Melavalavu and Melur. A mob wielding sickles and machetes boarded the bus from both portals and dragged Murugesan and his followers off the bus. Six of them were murdered on the road, whilst two escaped across the fields. Later that day, another prominent Dalit was also murdered. Murugesan's head was cut off and cast into a nearby well. The current *panchayat* president has an armed guard of police, but still faces obstacles to the fulfilment of his position.

Kodankipatti: Kodankipatti is a village about 22 miles West of Madurai. The dominant caste in this village are the *Kounders*. In 1990 the Dalits in the village refused to perform the demeaning caste jobs that were traditionally demanded of them, such as funeral rites, beating drums at temple festivals and so on. As a result they were first subject to a social boycott that deprived them of work, and then attacked and driven from the village with sticks and stones. Their houses were burned to the ground, and many of the Dalits still bear the scars that they received. They were encouraged to return to the village after the government rebuilt their houses with pucca tiles roofs and plastered walls, and also arranged several 'peace committees' where the castes could negotiate their differences. Though they returned to the village the Dalits insist that they were not provided with work any more and so commuted into Madurai to seek alternative employment. In 1999 the uneasy truce was broken by a series of small incidents. Firstly a number of the Dalits affiliated themselves to the Liberation Panthers. Secondly they began to demand certain rights within the village culminating in the demand to be able to show a film in the common square to mark Ambedkar's birthday. The film was disrupted by the higher castes who had not been asked for prior permission. The police were called in but they sided with the higher castes in castigating the Dalits. The next week the Dalits attempted to disrupt a weekly market, claiming that they had not been asked for permission for the square to be used. The government tried to organise some 'peace committees', but negotiations

broke down, and the Dalits were attacked and chased out of their homes once again. They took refuge six miles away in the DPI stronghold of Muduvarpatti.

Chidambaram: When the DPI abandoned their boycott of the elections and decided to stand in the TMC-led Third Front in the 1999 Lok Sabha polls, Thirumavalavan was given the constituency of Chidambaram. This is situated on the East Coast of Tamil Nadu, to the north of the state where the DPI is very strong. After a month of intensive campaigning many Dalit activists believed that Thirumavalavan stood a chance in the election. In the event he came second by a big margin (see footnotes to chapter nine) but managed to secure some 30 per cent of the vote and to relegate the AIADMK-Congress combine into third place. The election was most significant not for the result but for the electoral malpractice that the ruling coalition allegedly resorted to. Dalits across the constituency were threatened and warned not to vote, and many who went to vote on polling day found that 'their votes had been 'cast' already'. There were reports of violence in around 200 villages and social boycotts against the Dalits were said to be in force up to a month after the polling day. Where they were in a majority the Dalits also resorted to violence and electoral malpractice but the Dalits were the chief victims. They were also the community most represented in the prisons. It became apparent that the location of ballot boxes in the higher caste areas represents a contravention of the spirit - if not the law - of democratic practice. The elections also highlighted the caste-based polarisation of Tamil society since the election was fought on caste lines. In the village of Parengipatti the symbolic rejection of the Dalit candidates in the election was rendered apparent when the cow dung was smeared over the faces of all the Dalit candidates. As much as in Melavalavu it was clear that the locally dominant castes would not countenance the election of an Untouchable in their area. This differentiation between candidates also highlights the failings of the political process in India: Whilst all the candidates in Chidambaram were Dalits, the electorate only saw one as such.

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*When going to school
The land I saw was verdant
Today I have learned to think.*

*Memories
Of my village life
Have raised certain questions
Within me*

*Bushes have become trees
Calves have grown up
Forests have become land
Barren lands*

*Bear bounteous harvests
Single track paths
Have become vehicular roads
Gods who stood out in the open*

Have gained houses

But my comrades!

*My village people
Are still seeking in fields*

*For the life that
They lost.*

I, who wish to settle accounts

With humanity's betrayers

Say with courage

Yes!

I am a Dalit

(K. Subbaiah, Pondicheri. In *Dalit Mulukkam* Dec. 1998. Trans. Self)

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